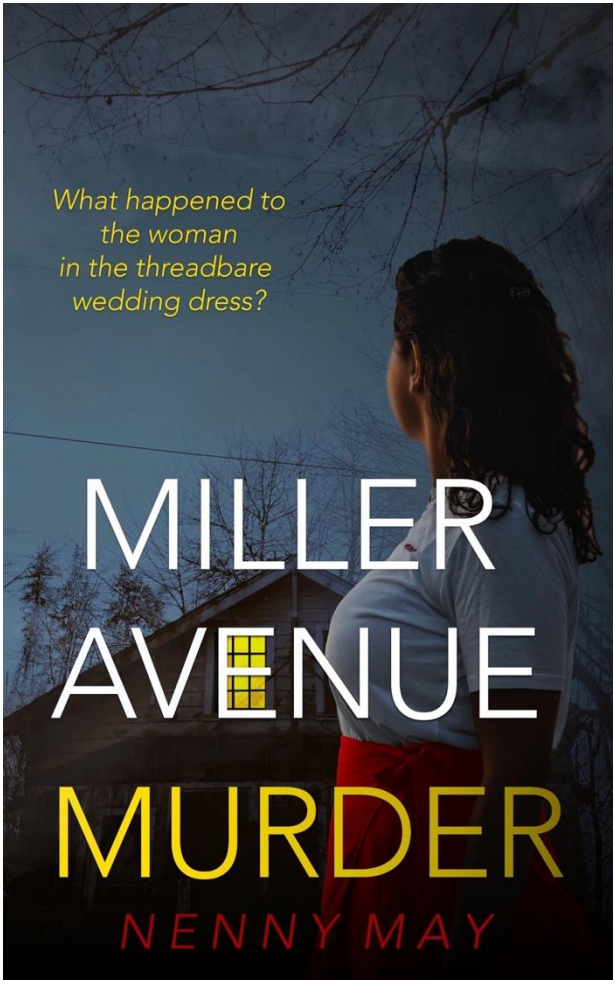
MILLER

AVENUE

MURDER

Nenny May


What happened to
the woman
in the threadbare
wedding dress?
MILLER
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Praise for the novels of the indie author Nenny May

‘A pleasurable read. Intriguing and suspenseful escape.’ – Faith, an Amazon reviewer on *Missing*.

‘Interesting title and description, I really enjoyed how well the characters were written and developed throughout the book. Most books I lose interested because of ADHD, but this one had me interested all the way through. Def recommend this book!’ - Jon, an Amazon Reviewer on *Missing*.

‘Very good book. Really interesting and makes the reader feel lots of emotions. I would

recommend it to everyone to read.’ -Baine, a Goodreads reviewer on *The Perfect father*.

‘Captivating and exciting, leave thinking what's going on? It has the perfect combination of mystery, thriller and romance.’ Walaa, a Goodreads Reviewer on *The Perfect Father*.

Nenny May

DEDICATION

To God for keeping me long enough to tell this story. And to my family for being by my side.

Nenny May

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This author would like you to know that she is a teenage self-published author who independently writes, edits, and publishes her books and is aware of the increasing risk of grammatical errors and plot holes. In light of this, she hosts pre-release grammar contests where participants scout for errors and plot holes in the hopes of winning a free copy of her book on release day! To be a part of this, simply reach out to Nenny May on any one of her many social media platforms or contact her at Authornennymay@gmail.com, where she will not only involve you in the grammar hunt but provide you with more challenges and access to ARC's

and deals directly to your Email. So, what are you waiting for, reach out to your new favorite indie author!

It should be noted that this book was formerly titled All She Left Unsaid but underwent a minimal rebranding where the metadata; cover, title, and description was tweaked to better suit the genre. It is now titled Miller Avenue Murder, it is jacketed with a cover that symbolizes the first in a series of novels that trails the characters Rachel Olson, Detective Dawson, Paul Campbell, Regan Sinclair, Claire fisher, and other returning characters.

This being the first in a series of books is the first attempt at a book series by Nenny May and despite that, she aims to bring her best in her works, aims to capture her readers from the very first page.

She would like to recognize her beta readers, the team of dedicated readers that opted to review her finished manuscript, that took their time and energy to make Miller Avenue Murder the book it is today.

Nenny May

About the Author

Nenny May is the author of Missing, a psychological thriller novel about a babysitter solving the kidnap and murder of ten children. Missing was first published on Wattpad where it gained an audience of over four thousand readers before it was released to bookstores.

Not too long after Missing's release, she publishes her second novel The Perfect Father, best known with its former title To New York's Attorney

on Wattpad. The Perfect Father follows a disgruntled lawyer who's determined to keep her father from serving time for a murder he didn't commit.

Nenny May was born in Abuja in north-central Nigeria to Nigerian parents, Juliet Obianwu who is a lawyer, and Charles Nwokoro, an engineer. Nenny May pursuing her mother's footsteps enrolled in Baze University, Abuja, where she is currently studying law.

Nenny May attended the local state schools; Pace Setters Academy, Abuja, junior high at Pace Setters College and senior high at Divine Mercy Secondary school, Abuja and is now enrolled in Baze University Abuja.

In her third year at Baze University, she published her debut novel Missing (2020). Less than a year later she

released her second novel The Perfect Father (2021), that went on to become an Amazon bestseller in its first few months.

From the author of Missing,
comes a riveting new
psychological thriller.

Tillamook county, Northwest Oregon had been lulled, a slumber gradually trailing the brisk night when an unthinkable tragedy sends a tremor through the district. Blake Campbell an antique storekeeper had been found lacerated in a threadbare wedding dress in the heart of her late husband's home on Miller Avenue.

And four women find themselves
tied to the investigation.

Detective Rachel Olson believes it’s a wedding night gone wrong. Criminal law professor Claire Fisher thinks it’s the ex-wife. Psychologist Lisa Patterson is convinced it’s the

disturbed son. And District Attorney Regan Sinclair has her money on the governor.

Four perspectives and a killer on the loose.

Nenny May

Books by Nenny

Missing: A Psychological Thriller Novel
The Perfect Father: A gripping legal thriller

Nenny May

PROLOGUE

"She was found with a kitchen knife in her hands. My bet whoever did this is an armature, panicked and tried to make it look like a suicide." Crime Scene Analyst Dan Harriet said. His voice was curt, firm.

An analysis from what he'd seen, what he'd studied. He'd been a first responder. In the area, he'd lurched to action when a dispatch call had been put out to nearby stations.

No matter how many crime scenes he responded to, no matter how many bodies he'd seen, Lieutenant Connelly Wilson couldn't do away with that gut-wrenching feeling that plagued him.

It was all too present with this case. With this body.

"Got to be really stupid to think you can pass this up as a suicide." Lieutenant Wilson had his hands on his hips.

With a breath, he took in the walls by the stairway. Crimson handprints had been pressed. Three left-handed prints, the last; faint and only three fingers had been imprinted on the paint. He could picture a frantic Jane Doe scurrying up the marble steps.

It wasn't an image he wanted.

It wasn't an image he could shake off.

A mental picture of a fifty-something-year-old bride fueled by pure adrenalin and fear darting up the stairs for her dear life, only to die in the master bedroom of her Tillamook home clung to him.

When he'd heard from Sherriff Pierce what had unfolded on Miller Avenue, not only had he instructed his best Detective to sit on the matter,

he'd reached for his Beretta 92, belted it to his waist, and braced the rising morning's rising sun.

"Whoever did this…" Dan had a dirty look on his hardened face. "Shit…" He shook his head. He was by the foot of the stairway. The stocky man in Dad-jeans and a taupe button-down had lead both the Lieutenant and Sargent from their cars out front, through the kitchen flocked with cadets by the creaking back door and Crime Scene Technician Janice Lee who'd had a shard of glass between her gloved fingers.

Harriet paused by the stairs.

"It's pretty sick." Sargent Beverly Garwood echoed.

New to the City Police Department, she'd thought it best to earn some brownie points and trail Wilson in his haste.

She didn't know how to feel about what she'd just walked into. This didn't just make her skin crawl. This was more. Much more than she could

wrap her head around. She'd faced things like this before. But not here. Not since she'd moved to Oregon.

"I want to believe only a screwball can pull this off." Wilson hoped.

"I'm no master at nutcases, but I'm inclined to think this was someone levelheaded." Beverly pitched, in her downturned deep brown eyes, a thousand-yard stare. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and jutted out her hip. They'd gone after this woman with a careless precision. She doubted this was the work of a madman.

She'd seen that before. This wasn't it.

Yes, it was messy. But as Dan had said, this had to be the work of an amateur.

"How'd you draw that conclusion?" Wilson wanted to know.

Withdrawn from her deliberations she glanced at him wide-eyed. She

released a breath and comported herself.

"Never mind, it was a stupid thought." She shrugged and waved a passive hand.

Beige stained with crimson was burned to her brain. The stairway adjoining the living room was properly lit, under the fluorescent glare, the crimson was unmissable.

"Glad I wasn't the one to say it." Wilson mused, the corner of his lips twitching in a nearly there smile that couldn't just make an appearance in the situation.

"This is…" Dan racked his brain for a suitable adjective, he couldn't find one. "And in a sleepy town like Tillamook no less," He mulled over. The poor man looked as if he were about to lose his lunch.

"Hasn't been so sleepy lately, high rate of robberies been keeping the locals on their toes." Wilson shoved his hands in his pockets.

He wasn't a local. Born in Colorado to German parents, Wilson much like most in Tillamook, found himself drawn to the quiet allure of the county, intrigued by the creameries and textile industries the town was known for. What had begun as a trip to Tillamook had landed him a home by the bay, the heart of a fair young woman and a curly-haired rascal of a six-year-old son.

To his crew, he was a sturdy man, average height with flakey pallid skin. It wasn't all that bad, but it was noticeable.

He was the reserved Lieutenant who had his head in the game and eyes on the prize.

"Robberies, not brutal murders, this is a whole other level. This is sick." Dan Harriet clarified.

He was speaking from the perspective of a local. Born and raised in Tillamook county.

"Think this could be a robbery gone wrong?" Beverly wanted to

know. She leaned against the brass railings.

"With a kitchen knife?" Wilson had an unruly eyebrow raised.

Beverly was beginning to rethink her decision to tag along. Wilson wasn't making this easy on her.

"No idea is a bad idea," Dan could feel the tension thickening. He wedged himself between the colleagues.

"No, no, I think this is an exception. You ever come into work with no clothes on, Garwood?" Connelly Wilson folded his hands over his chest and pinned Beverly with an obnoxious look.

"No,"

"Then there lies your answer. Tillamook might be a sleepy town but the robbers here, are armed." He gave mirthless laugh. "Or are you yet to educate yourself on Oregon's gun laws?"

"That's enough!" Dan blared. "A lunatic just brutalized a woman and

we’re talking about Tillamook robberies?” He’d grown impatient. He’d been there at the ripe crack of dawn, unable to return to the abyss of a sweet sleep.

“In any case, whoever pulled this off couldn't have gotten far. I noticed on my way that the area has been closed down...” Connelly Wilson lead the way up the stairs even though he didn’t know an inch of the place.

“As soon as the 9-1-1 call was placed our first responders had barriers put up.” Dan followed behind.

Reluctantly, Garwood had done the same.

“Watch your step!” Dan Harriet called over his shoulder. Indeed, there'd been droplets of dried blood on the stained marble floors.

“Who put in the call, there aren’t neighbors for miles?” Wilson reached the top of the stairs.

At the top was a hall. There were doors on either side. A narrow carpet

had been rolled over the marble. Against the wall to his right, a couch had been pressed, above it, a portrait of a man hung crooked. The man was old, much older than Wilson's father had lived to be.

If he were to take a guess the man on the wall would be in his late seventies, wrinkles decorating his proud, oval face, his eyes, heavy-lidded, were a bright blue above which sat faint grey eyebrows. His skin was ivory, sagging. He'd had on a suit, the image hadn't captured much of it, cutting off just below the man's neck.

Harriet had pushed his way into the first door to his right. Wilson followed close behind.

"Don't exaggerate it's a couple kilometers and it's a cleaning lady, apparently she was called in by our Jane Doe to spruce up the place, she let herself in and walked in on the body of her client." Sargent Garwood

said, coughed, features scrunched at the stench that welcomed her.

It couldn't be overlooked.

"Think she could have done it?" Wilson tossed the question in the air. The stench was familiar to him. He'd reached the grim point in his career when the slap against his nostrils from a rotting dead body was familiar. He needed to ponder over his life choices.

It was familiar, but he couldn't tell how much more of the odor he could endure.

"She was younger than our victim," Dan seemed to consider it, then said; "But… I highly doubt a woman could have… done this,"

"Women are taking over, what's their quote… anything a man can do a woman can do better? Yeah! Don't rule her out." Wilson was quick to say.

"So, our killer is a woman because women are fighting for equal rights?" She shouldn't have come. Wilson didn't want her there. These

brownie points weren't worth it. He was a misogynistic asshole who couldn't seem to wrap his head around a female sergeant with the potential to become lieutenant. Whatever." Garwood shrugged.

"Where's the cleaning lady?" Wilson hadn't been looking at anyone in particular but taking in the room.

Large couldn't begin to describe the room. This had to be the master bedroom, the heart of the crime scene. Beige seemed to be the domineering color in the home as it crawled up almost all the walls he'd seen. The room was well lit up, and with the morning sun glaring through the parted drapes, he couldn't draw his eyes from the bed, the one clustered by the forensics unit. He didn't recognize them from where he stood by the door. They had to be with the Sheriff's Department.

"Some rookies got their hands on her, standard procedure." Dan explained, rubbing a hand over his

eyes. Wilson couldn't miss the tiredness that wailed in the Crime Scene Analyst.

Wilson hardly knew responders from the Sherriff's Department, but Harriet was a notable name. One many precincts have tried and failed to recruit. He was loyal to Pierce's unit.

"Can't leave the country kind of thing, huh?" Garwood asked.

"Exactly," Harriet confirmed.

"So, she walks in on her dead boss, calls us, and what makes herself a coffee?" Wilson once more had been trying to sneak a peek between the wall the forensics team had created with their bodies. They'd moved in sync, the moment one was out of view, another took up the space.

"She was instructed to wait with the body, and one of our guys got to her and she told us all she knew."

"And she apparently doesn't know the name of our Jane Doe." Garwood

was skeptical. “Are we really buying this?”

“Seems like it,” Wilson shrugged.

“She’s an independent service, she works on call, she wasn’t given a name, but she was given an address and wired her charges ahead of time.”

“Can we get access to the bank information?” He asked.

“Not unless we have a warrant for her phone.” He bit back the urge to curse. It was stupid, but he’d reached an agreement with his wife Katherine Petrie-Wilson.

A stickler for the rules, she’d grown tired of cringing at his curses. And tied him down to a swear-jar that was taking too much of his salary already.

“What about the deceased’s phone?” He tried again.

“We haven’t gotten our hands on it?”

It was getting increasingly hard not to swear at Harriet’s words. He inched closer to the bed. What was

with this guy and unwarranted pausing in the middle of a room anyway?

He'd seen enough of the entryway in the bedroom. He wanted to be by the bed. By the body.

"It's her phone how far away from her could it be?"

"Apparently she didn't have it on her when her assailant pursued her." Garwood muttered.

Despite how rough around the edges, he was with Garwood, he didn't hate her. New to his team, Lieutenant Wilson was grooming her. He sure as hell was a lot nicer than the Lieutenant that groomed him when he was in her shoes.

"Get me that phone and get me that information!" He spat.

"We won't be needing it," Sherriff Pierce said. He'd strode into the room behind Garwood, and he'd moved as if he'd known the place by memory.

Connelly Wilson clenched his jaw and offered a passive glance at Pierce.

Their conversation over the phone had been brief. Pierce had filled him in on what he knew and hung up.

“Our victim is Blake Pierce, mother of one, no grand kids. I put a call in for her son, he’s being filled in on the… details.” Pierce spoke with an air of authority he’d earned from his grey years on the force.

“Fine, but can I see our victim already?” Wilson couldn’t take it. Not anymore. His patience had worn thin.

"I told the paramedics not to do anything with the body yet so she's unmoved from the bed." Dan Harriet said guiding them at last to the bed.

There was nothing too special about it, it was a standard king-sized four-post bed, what was peculiar however had been the corpse lay almost decoratively on it, beneath a crimson-stained sheet. Closer, the unpleasant smell was stronger. If that were possible.

“Jesus Christ!” Wilson hadn’t been prepared for what stared back at him.

It was pale and glared up at the white high ceiling in that blank death stare. Their Jane Doe was definitely in her early to mid-fifties. She'd had obvious smile lines and cheeks that sagged on either side of her face. She'd had pixie-cut hair that had been dampened and knitted with sweat. It wasn't easy for a woman of that age to run for her life. There was little white left in what was once a wedding dress. It was threadbare and soaked in crimson.

"Suspects?" Garwood drew his eyes from the dead woman’s.

“None yet.” Harriet was as taken by the corpse as Wilson had been.

“News vans are pulling up… Wasn’t able to get a name of what stations got here first but they’re right outside.” Robert Stone said perching at the other end of the bed, a camera between his beefy hands.

Wilson recognized the crime scene photographer from a previous case. A less daunting case.

“How are the rookies handling them?” Harriet was curious.

“Hard to tell, those guys are just as confused as the rest of us.” Stone placed his Sony A7Riv against his cheek, a white flash went off, startling Wilson who reached a hand to his eyes rubbing them.

Wilson knew the camera on sight from Stone. Off the crime scene, it was all the man could talk about and how much it had helped his side job as a nature photographer. Wilson can never forget the first time he’d heard of that, a crime scene photographer doubling as a nature photographer. He’d been starved for words.

“Get someone down there, now, we can’t let all this,” Sherriff Pierce gestured to the woman on the stained bed. “leak.”

Nodding Stone waved over an officer and relayed the Sherriff's orders.

He resumed his work, capturing images of the deceased Blake Campbell from every angle the man knew of. He'd taken his time with their Jane Doe almost as if he'd been concerned about the lighting. This was after all going in her record. In the autopsy file. He hadn't said a word after that.

Wilson returned his attention to the body and beneath his breath muttered. "Shit," He was going to get to the bottom of this. He'd let too many cases slip through his fingers, not this time. Not with Blake Campbell.

He would catch this lunatic, even if it killed him.

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Chase Dawson held the grime-stained translucent doors open by the handle for a rapidly approaching Rachel Olson who'd whizzed past him in quick strides, one steady Aldo Stessy pump clad foot after another. "Detective Olson," Chase Dawson called out to her retreating form.

"I hope to God what we have here is better than the scene I just came from," She'd said. For a moment as she sauntered past the reception, a petite room manned—womanned—by a Gertrude Green, the by-the-book sweet old lady with skin of olives and eyes of glee, the soft yet firm click, and clack of her pumps was the only auditory sensation, that is until she'd

caught a grunt accompanied by swift steps, he was straining to catch up.

"I don't know what you mean by better," Detective Dawson mused, the baritone of his voice sending a chill down her spine. She wasn't the only detective on the case. In her last, the case of a deceased pregnant Leona Wendy, she'd worked hand in hand with Detective Chase Dawson from the Tillamook City Police Department.

"The Sherriff and I were discussing the victim, our Jane Doe, when I saw you pull in from his office."

"Mhmm…We should appoint you as the much-needed door man, you saved me… five seconds on my way to my office."

He scuffed. "Very funny,"

"Thank you, I try," She slowed by the elevators. Restless, the bombing in her chest, insistent, erratic. she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“You know Mrs. Campbell was quite young when she got married for the first time,” She drew a strained breath stabbing the elevator buttons.

"Why do you feel that’s something I should know, was there like an age difference in the marriage or... something?" Rachel asked, features scrunched, listening to the lift as it whirred, reaching the ground floor.

"Oh, you could say that." Detective Dawson considered. "She was twenty when she got married and her late husband Christopher had been in his late fifties. We're talking thirty-years apart. If that isn't something for the people of Tillamook to talk about then I don't know what is."

"And how’d you dig this up?"

“Sherriff Pierce, he seems to know what there is to know about the Campbell family.”

He said just as the elevator doors parted, and two Uniforms strode out. “If I were you, I would spend some

time with him might give you some perspective on this case."

She would do just that. She would do whatever it took to get to the bottom of Blake Campbell's murder.

Detective Dawson had joined her into the opaque box, her fingers fumbling with the button to Steve Woods's floor below hers. He noticed the tremble in her fingers. "Don't get nervous on me, Olson. If we play our cards right, we can close the book on this in record time."

Her thin carved brows dipped and her eyes, a soil brown narrowed at her partner. They had conflicting perceptions on a job-well-done. There was a thin line between Rachel and Detective Dawson. She couldn't take home a cold case, that wasn't how she worked, but from what she'd researched on him, he'd stacked them up like collectibles. Her stomach twisted into a tight knot. She couldn't speak for Dawson, or how they did things at the City Police Department,

but down here, at Tillamook's Sherriff's Department she was driven with a blazing zeal to take her cases one step farther and avenge the victims.

If only someone had done the same when for her… Steeling herself, Rachel resisted the urge to wander the dark trenches of memory lane. She couldn't do that to herself. She knew what those memories would do to her.

"I'm not getting nervous." She forced through gritted teeth, an edge to her tone.

A jerk and a lurch and gradually, they rose a floor, her heart suspended in place, her breath caught in her throat. She wasn't nervous, she was jittery, excited… at least that's what she wanted to believe. This was her anticipation. It had been a while since her adrenaline had been injected into her veins in this manner.

She gave her reflection a once over.

His scent was loud amidst the calm, a seductive woody incense-like aroma that mesmerized her. She was tempted to inquire into the occasion that warranted such a fragrance, she'd bit her tongue on that.

The doors parted and Dawson led the way towards Evidence Technician Steve Woods's office. It was three doors down from the lady's restroom at the end of a hallway bustling with Uniforms. He'd maneuvered it as if he'd it was his place of work.

At the closed cedar door, he'd knocked, twice before letting them in.

Steve was a man average in height with skin a marshmallow hue, with reflective eyes that seemed to change in the sun. Rachel Olson's eyes had glimmered in recognition of a colleague she hadn't worked with in too long a while. He'd claimed time and time again that his eyes were hazel, but Rachel had been determined to refer to them as

reflective eyes, there was nothing he could say to convince her.

Steve had been by a drawer near the window at the other end of the room when both Detective's had strolled in. He hadn't looked up at them but acknowledged the presence. "Help yourself to a seat," He'd said, shutting the top drawer and tugging open a bottom one.

Dawson had learned his weight on the egg-shell drywall by the door. Detective Olson had taken up a seat by the scatter-brained man's desk.

"Detective Olson, Detective Dawson, I didn't expect to see either of you here this early, what seems to be the problem?" Steve Woods said shutting the bottom drawer and, in his hands, sat a folder and a pen. "Olson, were you able to speak with the Sherriff?"

"Not exactly but—"

"I was, and I was able to pick up a bit about our Jane Doe." Detective Dawson snatched the conversation.

Steve Woods made his way to his table but didn't sit.

"Care to share?" He tipped his head. Steve leaned against the surface.

"She goes by the name Blake Campbell. Died in her late fifties, anti-social from the looks of things, but I can't be so sure... She was apparently trapped in her first marriage; I'm guessing it was a master-servant kind of thing and not in the kinky way we're all thinking." Dawson rambled earning an appreciative stare from Olson. "Long story short, she was wedged between love and freedom." Steve Woods from what Rachel could tell seemed uninterested. The thought rumbled in her stomach; her palms clammy. She needed her team infected with the fervor that Dawson had caught from her. Nevertheless, a bulb glimmered in her head.

"Was the deceased's phone taken into evidence?" She pitched.

Steve ought to have come across Blake Campbell's phone while at the scene. It didn't seem likely she would have had one during her marriage with Christopher Campbell, but she ought to have gotten her hands on one after his passing.

Rachel needed access to that.

"I am actually not sure. I had a few of the guys down at the scene bag everything and log it as evidence and I am yet to sort through them." Steve Woods had responded. He'd tapped the surface of his desk.

"Okay, well—"

"Really man, a whole evidence technician hasn't sorted through the evidence collected from the scene?" Detective Dawson wasn't satisfied.

"What do you want from me man?" He straightened and went around his desk to his chair. "I haven't found the time,"

"We've got an investigation, Woods, we need your findings to move forward, and I have a feeling

you have something for us, you just haven't gone through it on your own yet."

"Dawson leave it, he has his process," Rachel reprimanded. He could egg his team at the City P.D., but that wasn't how her people worked, they worked on their own time and she respected it as far as it worked in line with her time.

"I'm not disputing the fact that he has his process. He has his, I have mine and you, have yours. I am just speaking to him, man to man. And he knows that, that phone is somewhere within reach and if he can just hand it to us, we can be on our way."

Steve seemed unsettled. Rachel detested that.

What kind of leader was she if she didn't carry her team along?

Steve reached into his pockets and retrieved a small key; with it, he'd bent beneath his table and unlocked a drawer. A Ziplock was pulled from it and handed to Detective Olson.

“Whatever you find on there, I haven’t had the time to go through so it’s not going to be in the report.”

She shook her head. “Report the finding of a phone belonging to the deceased, that’ll do.”

“Great job, Woods. And don’t look so glum, hey,” Dawson pushed himself off the wall and approached the table. “A bunch of us on the CSI team are heading downtown for some beers, you can drown your sorrows in a chilled bottle of Budweiser. I don’t know about you, but that seems like a solid deal.”

“I’ll sleep on it.” Steve Woods said.

“Since that’s behind us, I actually came here to find out if bloody clothes were uncovered from the scene?" She leaped to the chase.

"Now that you've mentioned it, yes. I was about recording our findings so far and reporting everything to you," She cocked her head. So, blood-stained clothes had

been uncovered from the vicinity and Steve Woods hadn't thought to run to her or Dawson with it? Those clothes could be the secret to uncovering their killer.

"And? What kind of clothes were found in the area?" Steve Woods's shoulders fell.

She'd taken the elevators up a floor and hurried, forking left by a row of chairs perched outside the Sherriff's office. Her office was two doors down to the left.

It was guarded.

The man who'd planted himself in wait was unfamiliar to her. Dark in ways that had her blood rushing into her ears. He had these angry eyes canopied by thick untrimmed eyebrows that kicked her fight or flight instinct into full gear. Where was Dawson when she needed him? The man’s lips chapped had been pressed in a thin line. Her gut

tightened; pulse pounding in her wrists and fingers curled in a fist. But what did she have to tremble for? She was in the Sherriff's Department, there were cameras strategically positioned outside her office... A girl can never be too careful... She thought to herself.

She wore a plastic smile, greeting; "Good morning, Sir, I'm Detective Olson, how may I help you?" She'd asked rummaging through her pocket for her keys. She'd grabbed it out of Betty— her snow-white 2018 Lexus Sedan—before coming in... She couldn't have forgotten it... could she? Somehow, the thought of returning to the safety of her car eased the panic that sat in wait. Her fingers pressed against a cool sharp metal, she'd had it in her blazer pocket, her left pocket. She'd thrown the door open in a surge of disappointment and… fear? Her heart had sunk. Regret rained over her and she didn't have an umbrella. She couldn’t shake the trapped feeling

when the man joined her in her office, the suffocating feeling as though she were all of a sudden claustrophobic.

Whoever this man was, if he intended to make her the topic of the morning news, she would have nowhere to run… No scratch that, she had a window… She hoped in the depth of her erratic heart that it didn't come to that.

"How may I help you?" She asked again, this time daring to approach her table, resuming her position behind her desk.

In a splinter of a second, she was slumped over her desk in a crimson pool of her own making, eyes white, blank in a dead stare, jaw slaked as blood drooled. There was grotesque damage to her swollen-purplish skin. She bit back a scream, her office, familiar, whirling before her eyes.

She offered the grim man a seat at the other side of her desk. He obliged.

Clearing his throat and meeting her dead in the eye, the man asked;

“What happened to my mother?” His anger sizzled like hot oil. Rachel tapped her spaghetti fingers on the table. She wasn't nervous… she told herself, she was listening, old habits die hard.

“And who exactly is your mother, and have you filed a missing person's report?” Rachel reached for a pen and a record book she'd shoved in her drawer. She stifled a yawn. Turning into work before the crack of dawn would do that to a person.

She reached for her desktop computer, turning it on.

“Blake Campbell.” The tightness in Rachel Olson's gut had returned. He was the son of the woman in the crimson-stained threadbare wedding dress.

Go figure…

“She was my mother. She was an antique store owner and… and I had to get down here from Portland the moment I heard that she was

murdered in our family home?" Rachel felt for him.

Blake Campbell had been a mother.

Someone had killed her; someone had deprived a helpless son of his mother.

There was a fierce frustration in her belly; it burned like a thousand storms.

She was going to get to the root of this.

Because someone had done something similar to her mother, and she'd wanted to know who. She'd wanted to see the culprit rotting away in a cell, plagued with his own regret. She hadn't gotten the opportunity.

She wasn't going to let that happen this time.

When she'd lost her mother in 2010, she'd been devastated despite the apparent causes. The hospital had ruled it as a casualty, she'd passed away in her sleep during her recovery. She'd succumbed to her injuries. Her

heart had stopped. Why then had the authorities overlooked their home that had been broken into, why had no one acknowledged the rooms that had been ransacked? Why then didn't they give much thought to the goddamn bullet holes? Rachel had built a story, linked it to two killers but had come up empty-handed. How wouldn't she, she hadn't had the backing of the police at the time. And when she'd joined the force, she'd made sure families of murder victims wouldn't go through what she'd endured. Rachel hadn't quite gotten over the loss till her ex-husband Mathew had come along. He'd been a shoulder, a lover…A sweet flame in her world of ashes.

"Calm down sir," Rachel said just out of protocol. An outburst would do nothing to get her closer to finding whoever had killed Mrs. Campbell. "Mr. Campbell, I would like to implore you bear with us, we are just as startled as you and we are working

tirelessly to get to the bottom of this situation." They were, and she would pull some strings, she would see if she could get things to move a little faster than they were. That was Dawson's strong suit, and she was going to play on that.

She didn't know why she felt compelled to do so, but she did.

She wanted to know more about the Campbell family, there must be something in their family history that could lead her to their killer, and Mr. Campbell was going to be her ticket to finding out who this alleged killer could be.

"What, you want me to be satisfied with that generic response?" He leaned forward in his seat. She drank him in. He was handsome to say the least, not that she was on the market no. She was a career woman married to her job. That didn't mean she couldn't sprinkle compliments where they were due. With slender eyes of a blue-green hue, his eyes

reminded her of spring break in college, of trips she would sneak out to with friends. He had a chiseled jaw; sharp, a contrast to cheeks she felt she could reach out to pinch. Whoever his father had been, he ought to have been quite the looker. "From what I hear, she was stabbed in her bedroom?" Rachel nodded solemnly.

She'd been at the scene earlier on. She'd been with the deceased. She'd been a first responder.

"Mr. Campbell, your mother didn't deserve that. No one deserves to pass away like that. It's quite unfortunate."

"Unfortunate?!" He rapidly rose to his feet. The chair in her office falling backward in shock, the noise causing a rippling effect on Rachel who'd exploded in a coughing fit, a shriek lodged in her throat, a white chill gripping her fingers and toes. "Unfortunate is what you say to a person whose car was stolen overnight, unfortunate is losing my

keys and not having access to my house! Unfortunate doesn't cover my mother being stabbed to death in our family home. I mean we spent Christmas there!" She composed herself. "We had dinner that she prepared! She's never been a good cook, but she tried her best and we still stomached it, and now I'm hearing someone killed her out of cold blood and you want me to bear with you? Bullshit!" Mr. Campbell flared his hands over his head. She'd held his gaze in hers, apologetic eyes beckoning him to cool his temper. He was blind to her efforts.

He turned and strode towards the door. He paused turning to look back at her. "I want that killer caught before the end of the week or I'm taking matters into my own hands."

Clark Finn had been in a better mood when Rachel Olson had wandered down to the morgue. It was a fair distance from her office. It

wasn't below the ground floor as she'd initially expected when she'd found herself on the force... Time and time again she'd wandered down two floors in search of the morgue. Time and time again she'd come across Crime Scene Technician, Janice Lee's office.

The morgue at Tillamook County's Sherriff's department was in a separate building towards the parking lot in the west wing of the lot. She'd had to yet again, duck her head from the grinning sun and scuttle towards the building that nearly mirrored the main building, only this didn't have the grime-filled windows that mentally triggered her gag reflexes. She hadn't made her way to the morgue during Leona Wendy, her last victim's murder investigation. No, everything had been reported to her. At the time she didn't have a frantic son on her neck threatening to take matters into his own hands if something wasn't done and done fast.

Of course, Leona Wendy had her parents, seeking justice for their little girl, but they hadn't resulted to threats. Mr. Campbell had, and Rachel Olson didn't want to know what he meant by taking matters into his own hands.

Blue-grey ran up the walls, it was a properly lit foyer, chairs lining either side by the door. A front desk had been occupied by two women, one of whom had been on the phone, features scrunched. Detective Olson with her hands in her pockets met the women by their desk. It had been pressed against a wall, on the left a door, unmarked.

She turned away from it, her lips pressed in a thin line.

“I’m here for…” Her words caught in her throat when those doors barged open and Forensics pathologist Jeffery Mariana rushed through looking in need of the morning sun. Not only had the honey skinned man been scowling on his way out, he’d had his fingers curled into a fist as if

he’d just stumbled on rather displeasing news…

She was tempted.

A minute with him, or with Medical Examiner Clark Finn?

He was already through the doors before she could decide.

She was left with Finn.

She was directed through doors, down a flight of stairs to the laboratory.

Clark Finn hadn't smiled up at her when she'd turned the corner to where he'd been seated by the body. Nothing like that, though he hadn't groaned or scowled in her presence, and Rachel was going to take that as a win. Clark Finn hadn’t been alone, overlooking the body, he’d already been occupied by Detective Dawson.

Both men had looked up at her, only Dawson had held her stare, Clark had returned his attention to the half-naked cadaver before him. Head to toe, he had been clothed in scrubs, gloves, and a surgical mask. Rachel

wasn't new to the morgue setting, and yet the chill never seemed to get old. The temperature was below average to preserve the corpses. People that once roamed the earth going about their day had been reduced to mere remains. She reeked of empathy. Though she wasn't the only foul stench. She couldn't seem to overlook the medical smell, the embalming chemicals that swirled in the air. It left a bitter taste in her mouth.

She didn't need that in her line of work. Emotions were foreigners in her role as a Detective, and Dawson seemed to have been paying extra attention when that was taught during their training.

"Did you always want to open dead people up when you were little?" She made an attempt at small talk; she was dipping her toes in the waters first.

She'd been initially introduced to Clark during Leona Wendy's case, her first murder investigation. They

hadn’t worked hand in hand. They’d barely worked together at all. Whenever they would meet it would be during the submission of a medical report and other than that they’d kept communication to a bare minimum.

That was until, Blake Campbell.

"I actually wanted to be a surgeon, but I flunked out of school at a point, got back and this seemed to be the best fit." Clark Finn rose from where he'd been sitting. The chair groaned and screeched against the tiled floors as his calves pushed against it.

"How's our Jane Doe?" With her hands crossed over her chest, she stole a glance at him. He was a lean man... She wasn't profiling, but of middle eastern descent... was it profiling if she herself was a person of color? He had an occupied chin, how was this allowed in his line of work? Wouldn't or couldn't the embalming fluid clutch onto his beard and trail him home? Mentally snapping her fingers, she recalled that he would be wearing

surgical masks during his work hours much like he had hanging around his neck, the straps still clinging to his ears for dear life.

"Dead." His voice rumbled.

"Find a cause yet?"

"I'm good at my job; of course, I found a cause." Clark mirrored her actions and crossed his arms over his chest. "From what I can tell, and what I was telling Dawson," He nodded towards the Detective at the other end of the body. "She was stabbed ten times within the chest and stomach regions" He pulled down the white cloth that had been covering their Jane Doe's body, Blake Campbell's body. Aside from the scars, incisions he'd made during the autopsy, there were wounds, stab wounds he'd done his best to disinfect and stitch. Four-lined her right rib, two between her sagging breasts, three at her hip, and a single wound at the left corner of her neck.

Standing there, her eyes fixed on the Blake Campbell's bleached white torso, Rachel Olson made yet another attempt at building a back story. Ten stab wounds indicated a personal attack, and yet not enough since whoever had done this hadn't gone for the head regions. Whoever had done this had the intent to kill, but perhaps hadn't wanted to disfigure his victim. Possibly a rookie. Someone close to the deceased.

“Dawson, you’re practically an encyclopedia on our victim, can you draw up any reason why someone would have wanted to… off her?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know that much about her life after the death of her first husband Christopher.”

“Well, that’s useless in this situation,”

“Perhaps.” He mumbled.

"She was slashed, lacerated if you would," Clark Finn continued, pointed to signatures drawn on by a kitchen knife on Blake's lean wrinkled torso.

"deep bruising to the skin and damage to both the soft tissue and bone indicate a rather large assailant… a strong one." He hovered his hand over a wound he'd stitched with Jeffery. "…She was inevitably strangled to death." He concluded by gesturing towards her swollen neck. Fingerprints had been etched onto what was once a saggy vainly neck.

"Can't we get umm… fingerprints off her neck?" Detective Dawson pointed towards Blake Campbell's neck.

"Yes, it can, and I am working on it and will have the report sent off to Detective Olson's desk by the end of the week." Medical Examiner Clark Finn answered.

"Age?" Rachel asked.

"Late fifties, best bet fifty-six."

"How long had she been dead before we found her?"

"My guess not long. I'm estimating an hour an hour and a half." That wasn't enough time for

their killer to have gotten too far. He had to have been in the vicinity. Why hadn't they noticed him then? Even if he'd done away with the clothes, he'd worn to commit the act wouldn't someone at the scene have noticed a naked man fleeing?

With a renewed keenness towards her work, she'd thanked Medical Examiner Clark Finn, abandoned him with Detective Dawson, and set out towards Crime Scene Analyst Dan Harriet's office.

He'd met her halfway, with her forehead creased, mind awhirl, she'd barely made it out of the elevator when she'd been joined by Crime Scene Analyst Dan Harriet. He hardly worked directly with her. It had been almost two years since she'd worked directly with Harriet. Their last investigation had involved the murder of Leona Wendy. Her case had been closed after it was uncovered that her baby-daddy in an attempt to perform a late abortion had executed his

girlfriend. “What do have for me, Dan?” Rachel retraced her steps, now on route to her office. He wasn’t far behind.

Men’s clothing had been uncovered from the scene. A button-down in particular. Steve Woods was yet to run it for DNA, but if it was in the vicinity it was going to turn up with the blood of the deceased. And if she was lucky, the DNA of their killer. It would add to the profile of their suspect and Rachel was itching to know just who this man could be.

“You were barely at the scene.” Dan scolded.

If only he knew how invested she was despite spending less time than him at the home of the deceased.

“Had to report back here…Wasn’t able to send out the statements that brought me here, but… I actually met with the son of Blake Campbell…” Her pace slowed, almost as if to give the middle-aged Harriet a chance to catch up.

"Hmm…"

"Yeah, hmm… is right," She bobbed her head as she spoke. She didn't quite catch Mr. Campbell's name, she'd been at the edge of her seat, peeved by his threat.

"Have much to say?"

"He threatened to take matters into his own hands." She shrugged and once more at the row of chairs placed outside the Sherriff's office, she'd taken a left. She was yet to meet with him. They'd barely conversed at the scene. He'd requested to meet with her to discuss further on the victim… she'd had too much on her plate and not enough time to get back to him.

"He's not going to act on his words, is he?" She blinked, focusing once more on Harriet. He was a man with a stern yet peaceful face. It was a tad difficult to piece where he was from with a single glance. The East-Asian American looked nothing like a stereotype. Not that Rachel Olson

dabbled in stereotyping her colleagues. It was simply an observation that seemed to drift across her mind. Irrespective, it was the second time she'd partaken in taking a guess where her colleagues were from.

Her shoulders rose and fell. She wasn't going to take Mr. Campbell's words lightly. He'd seemed like a man that would keep to his promise.

That had burdened her.

"I don't know. But I'm sure you didn't stop me to discuss Mr. Campbell," She glimpsed at Dan over her shoulder and once more begun rummaging for her keys.

"No, I didn't. I actually came to talk about a theory I've been playing with since I took my leave from her home." She was alive with an enthusiasm.

Progress.

She pushed the door open.

"Run me through it, Dan."

Dan Harriet let himself in and took a seat.

She didn't join him. No, she went for the air conditioner, switching it on from the wall socket, the cool air that swirled its way around the room did wonders to her nerves.

She returned to her rightful place behind her desk.

"According to Cole Evans, our criminologist, we're looking for a strong, lean male who's quick on his feet. Not nearly the age of Jane Doe." They had a profile. A lean male, fast, who'd been adorned in a stained button-down.

Rachel clicked her fingers. "Sorry to cut you short, Harriet, but we need officers looking into chapels, elopement centers and cathedrals and someone to look for weddings that took place within the last twenty-four hours." She was yet to formally request this; it had just come back to her as she'd recalled what their deceased had passed away in. And

who better to pass the word to the rookies and Uniforms than Dan Harriet?

Harriet nodded.

"And I want us to expand our search space. Steve Woods mentioned a blood-stained shirt he'd taken into evidence… If we can go further with our search, we can get our hands on more scrapped articles of clothing."

"I'll get my people on that as soon as I leave. But I should mention, I have my doubts the Sherriff would agree with your request to expand our search."

"Why not?"

"The Campbell case might be of importance but that's going to press heavily on our budget."

She leaned towards him; her palm flat against her desk. "Someone's mother was brutally stabbed to death in her own home. And we're concerned about the budget?"

He sighed. "I can't say I understand your interest in this case,

nor do I want to. In short, I won't speak further on the matter. You might get lucky… I still have my doubts." Rachel leaned back in her seat. He wasn't the one she had to pick a fight with. He didn't have a say on the budget. Sherriff Pierce did. Dan Harriet didn't have a say on anything that didn't concern examining the scene. "I do however feel, Detective Olson, that it should be brought to your attention my take on what could have happened to Blake Campbell on the night of her murder."

He gauged her reaction. She remained unchanged, patient. She knew what it was like working with Harriet. He took his time delivering information. And though she'd been irked initially, she'd grown used to him.

"Well, building suspense is getting me next to nowhere. I began having my doubts about the wedding-night-gone-wrong theory a little after I departed from the scene."

She knew about his notion. She'd been at the scene when he'd pitched it to her. A wedding-night-gone-wrong best explained the threadbare, crimson-stained wedding dress Blake Campbell had been murdered in. It explained the back door Robert Stone, the crime scene photographer had been concerned with. She hadn't disputed his theory. She'd run with it.

"Where I initially believed that her jilted husband had found his runaway bride in their home and had taken out his pent-up aggression and humiliation on her, I begun to deliberate further, and I think it would be best we do away with that theory."

"Do away with it? If we're not looking at a jilted husband, what do you think could have happened?" She gestured with her hands for him to continue, she was growing impatient.

"I'm not too sure, this is after all the first day we're on the scene. But I've had a talk with Clark Finn and

the facts just don't fall into the category of a crime of passion."

"And why didn't Finn mention the talk he'd had with you?" She tilted her head. They were working on borrowed time. A woman had been murdered and the killer was still at large. This wasn't the time for Clark Finn to forget to mention a conversation he had with Dan Harriet.

"I don't have an answer to that." She let out a harsh breath.

"Fine. But our deceased was found in a wedding dress, a button down was found near the scene and she was killed in her home… that seems to me like a crime of passion."

"That may be so, but level with me, Detective. You were at the scene, you saw the blood splattered walls, and floors? She was chased, this person had been determined to take the life of Blake Campbell." She pulled open her top drawer. From inside, she'd brought out a folder and a branded paper. She would document

his findings, and in her spare time, she would return to the scene. She trusted Dan. If he were to have one ability it would be listening to his instincts and she wasn't going to doubt it. She was welcoming anything that could bring them closer to closing the book on Blake Campbell. It was the least the elderly woman deserved.

"Okay, so what are we building to, Dan, because I don't have all day…" She clicked the pen, once, twice…

"I suspect this could have been a premeditated attack." Her eyes broadened.

"Didn't think you were going to make it, Woods!" Dawson called out at the top of his lungs, leaned against the marble counter, a hand waved towards the bartender. He'd picked out the Evidence Technician from a distance. The lean man, though he wasn't all that tall had an air to him

that couldn't be missed, and Dawson would like to pin it on the pornstache he insisted on keeping that didn't quite work, but he was bringing it back into style.

The evenings were rather slow for the local bar. Dawson knew this from experience. This wasn't his first time down at American Angels. As a matter of fact, the self-proclaimed cocky idiot could take it as far as claiming to be a loyal customer. But as Dawson had led his team through the doors, he'd been startled at the turnout. Bodies pressed against each other; it was a miracle they'd gotten a table. It hadn't been the best, but it beat the by-the-bathroom table a couple had gotten stuck with. He could barely get the attention of the lean blonde bartender that worked the night shift, the one with the generous rack that he was sure boosted business.

"Aye! What does a man gotta' do to get some service around here?!" Dawson was growing impatient.

"Didn't think I was going to show up, Dawson. I was heading home, I'd made it a quarter way there but then, I remembered your offer and I could use it after the day I've had," Steve woods said his nose and strong cheekbones scrunched. Dawson assumed the young man wasn't accustomed to the stench of sweaty clustered bodies.

"After the day we've all had. I tell you when I heard I was being thrown on another murder investigation with the Sherriff's department, I thought the Lieutenant was shitting me. I skipped out on going to the scene, don't need some dead woman's eyes burned to my brain,"

"Well, I guess *lucky you*," Steve had replied with a subtle disdain. "You've got Olson to cover for you, if you don't show up, she

does and she just fills you in on the need to know,"

Dawson grinned. Perhaps he was lucky to have her. "The rest of us had to trudge our tired asses to the scene at the butt-crack of dawn, Dude it wasn't something any of us wanted to do,"

Dawson chuckled at Steve Woods' choice of words.

"I am not a morning person,"

"Neither of us are, man," Woods jabbed him in the shoulder.

"I didn't really get to ask Olson about the scene, how was it?"

"Bloody," Woods replied.

The familiar blonde walked up to their side of the counter.

"How may I help you boys today?" Her voice was petite, friendly. She'd pulled her golden curls into a tight bun that highlighted her dominant features, eyes an ocean blue and flustered cheeks.

"Hmm… I always seem to forget your name, sweetie, could you

come closer so I can get a glance at that name tag of yours?" She rolled her eyes at Dawson's cheap line.

"It's a busy day, Dawson, order something or stop holding up the line,"

Her feistiness only egged him on, but he'd shoved that part of him into a back drawer for the meantime. "Alright, Susanne, we need Budweiser's all round, table of eight,"

"In a sec," Susanne said vanishing to the other end of the counter. Dawson had been tempted to call after her, but something else had caught his eye. The screen above the counter. The news headlines. He couldn't make out what the reporter had been saying but it looked like a broadcast from earlier in the day.

Breaking: Elderly Woman Stabbed to death in her Tillamook Home. The headline read.

He huffed, it was expected, the headlines were hardly accurate. He anticipated it was a decision by the

network to boost ratings. No one seemed interested in a story about a woman who died from strangulation, stabbing just seemed more gruesome and that was what their target audience wanted to see. It was a case of the viewer says jump and they ask how high.

He only knew this through his sister, a journalist who wouldn't stop yapping about work.

Where he believed in 'don't bring work home with you', Annabelle Dawson believed her work was a part of her she couldn't shake, and as such, it was a suitable point of conversation any day any time.

Susanne returned to the waiting men. "Eight beers coming up!" She said and turned and reached into the fridge for eight bottles. One by one she placed them on the counter toward the two men. One by one, Dawson picked up what he could, what he couldn't, he handed to Steve Woods and lead the way between two

stocky men, a couple that seemed to mistake the bar for a club, and a woman that seemed all too familiar.

This couldn't be his eyes playing tricks on him.

"Detective Olson?" He tapped the woman's arm. She glimpsed up at him from her phone. "To what do we owe the occasion? The good-girl has turned bad I see," He teased. She didn't seem amused. If anything, she'd seemed rueful that he'd stumbled upon her.

"I heard you and the CSI team were getting drinks here and I… I don't know… thought I could get in on that action?" Dawson looked between he and Steve Woods—a man who seemed less than comfortable in the presence of his boss. "Woods, get us one more bottle, Miss. Olson, let's get you to our table." He tilted his head in the direction he'd been heading. He led the way to the table at the back that had been booming with banter.

“That would have to be, Leona Wendy’s murder.” Crime scene technician Janice Lee shrugged a chunky shoulder.

“Am I interrupting?” Dawson rose the beers in his hands and the table roared and cheered.

“And look who I found?” He stepped aside giving room for Detective Olson to come into view. She offered a meek wave to the table and they’d fallen silent. Janice and Clark who’d been seating side by side shared a look. “Guys relax, she’s not here to dock your pay cheque, she’s here to loosen up, isn’t that right Olson?” When he was yet to get a response from her, he turned to her. “Now don’t humiliate me in front of the guys,” He encouraged with a small smile.

She shook her head and turned on her heels that had begun to draw sores and blisters on her sweaty feet. She’d pushed past grinding bodies, squished bodies, from lean to bulky

until she'd felt once more, the autumn evening breeze hit her skin in a rush. It tousled the strands of dark curled hair that had made their way from the loose French braid she'd pulled it into that morning. She gulped a lung-full and relished in the soft scent of the earth in the calm of Tillamook's desolate streets.

Many of the neighboring businesses had locked up for the night. There was a nail salon that sat slumbering across the street, a café whose neon closed sign lit up the street, and to the right of the district bar she'd escaped from, was an ice-cream shop that sat in an eerie darkness.

Her eyes squeezed shut. What had she been thinking? These were her colleagues, not her friends, she'd never been good at that, making friends, it was harder than it seemed and always put her on edge, as if she were putting herself out there to be judged, probed, and poked. She'd

spent her day with a woman who was judged probed and poked by officials who acted like they knew what the hell they were doing in actuality, they were working together to make a calculated guess, a detailed judgment.

Rachel Olson wasn't ready, after she and Mathew had called it quits, she'd recoiled into a shell she couldn't seem to break out off, fallen into a pattern of work, home, work home, and nothing more. Of course, home meant, Netflix and torturing herself with all the reasons he'd left her. All the reasons he'd taken his son with him.

"What was that back there?" Detective Dawson's voice rippled through the crisp evening air. She threw her head over her shoulders and took in his tousled work-worn features. In spite of the retreating sun, she acknowledged the five-o-clock-shadow that wrapped his chin and face, the dulled flame in his eyes a brown that competed with hers. He'd

undone the first two buttons on his shirt, and rolled his sleeves up to his elbow, exposing strong forearms coated with a thin line of long dark brown hair.

"Nothing," She returned her attention to the empty streets. She'd never been to this part of town. 4th Street, Carnahan park was somewhere in the distance, she wasn't sure where. In spite of being a local born and raised in Tillamook, Rachel Olson barely knew the sleepy town of Tillamook Oregon. Not that she'd tried to know it. She didn't know it, and it didn't know her, and she was fine with that.

"That wasn't nothing, that was…" He wasn't sure. "…quite a show," He settled.

"Hope you enjoyed it?" She didn't bother looking at him as she spoke. She was waiting, anticipating when another car would zoom by. That didn't seem likely. American Angel was nearly at capacity and yet

not a car was in sight. She'd seen pedestrians' troop in and out of the building, none had loomed around the cars that lined the curb. This was a weird part of town. The night was fast approaching, its velvet darkness promising as much as the day. Rachel was not looking forward to retreating to her home—house, it had lost all homey-tendencies when Sterling had moved in with his father.

She hadn't argued against it. He wasn't her son. He was Mathew's from his first marriage that had ended in a bitter divorce.

"We would like the lead performer to join our table if that isn't too much to ask?"

She wasn't better than his ex-wife, she just couldn't look past his little flaws—those weren't little. The nagging, the subtle abuse, the drinking. She couldn't look past it and she hoped to God it didn't affect Sterling.

"She's unavailable." Rachel shook her head and reached into her pocket for her keys, this was stupid, leaving her comfort zone was stupid. She had a ton of work anyway, how could she have duped herself into thinking she could socialize? She wasn't ready. Not yet.

She hadn't gotten over the sweet smile of her ex-husband's eight-year-old son.

She'd begun making her way towards her car, she'd parked around the corner.

"You don't have to leave, Rachel." She paused at the way her name rolled off his tongue. She turned. She did a great job at masking the fluster in her amber cheeks. Till that moment, she'd always been Olson to him. She didn't know how she felt about him using her first name.

"I do, because these people see me as their boss and not their peer, you should have seen the

uncomfortable look in Steve Woods' eyes when you called out my name. It was dark in there, but I have eyes, Dawson, I saw how everyone stiffened up when you introduced me to your table."

"Because they're not familiar with having you there, if you'd just broken the ice like I set you up to do, we won't be out here in the cold."

"If I'd just broken the ice," She shook her head, "I don't fit in, Dawson. Breaking the ice would do nothing for me."

He wasn't convinced.

"You know, you don't have to be here, Dawson, stop trying to take control of this situation like you do every damn one." He frowned.

"I don't—"

"Yes, you do. And I'm not going to go on a tangent to prove to you something you can dig deep down and figure out." She gulped a breath. "I don't fit in. Just leave it," She said again and cracked her frigid

knuckles and rubbed her hands together.

Had she only known; she wouldn't have wasted the gas it took to get her down to American Angels? This was a good forty-minute drive from her home. At the time she would get back to her bed, she doubted she would have it in her to go through Blake Campbell's phone.

"What's this really about, Olson?" It was her turn to frown and when she did, she'd made sure to scowl at him. He couldn't find it anywhere in him to let sleeping dogs lie, could he?

"Don't act as if we didn't just return from a hell shift investigating the brutal murder of someone's mother. Excuse me if I suddenly feel too tired and out of it to chat with my colleagues," He wasn't satisfied with her response. It was getting too dark and too chilly for her to give a shit. Her home didn't seem all that attractive, she thought again, but it

was better than getting frostbite trying to prove to her work partner all the reasons why she'd frozen up at the idea of putting herself out there amidst seven of her colleagues.
"Goodnight, Dawson." She pulled out her keys and picked up her pace towards where *Betty* had been nestled in the cold.

He hadn't come after her.

Why had she been half expecting him to?

Home didn't seem all that appealing when she'd pulled Betty into the driveway and killed the engine. Embraced by the darkness of the night, alone on the driveway of a petite home on 9th Street, she contemplated heading back to American Angels, swallowing her pride and joining her chirping colleagues.

The silence was roaring, but her contempt was louder. How hadn't Detective Dawson seen the criticism in their eyes, the hesitance that clamped their lips shut? What was she supposed to do? Linger around until the discomfort suffocated them and one by one, everyone got up from the table and left? She couldn't escape it. It plagued her like a shadow, that inability to fit in, the one that had sent Mathew packing, she was a crumpled puzzle peace. A lot of things had sent her ex-husband packing. But he'd managed to underline the primary problem. She was. She had to change if any part of her wanted a chance with him, a chance at a happy marriage.

Edging onto her mid-thirties, Detective Olson wasn't sure marriage was on her agenda anymore. Hadn't it been scrapped off the day Mathew walked out her front door?

Releasing a sigh, she bit back the spiraling memories. To Rachel, home meant memories. Home meant neighbors that knew of her inability to keep a man. How wouldn't they when Mathew had been determined to make a scene? Screamed and yelled as if she'd committed a capital crime and when people had wandered onto their porches, he'd trudged his things to his pickup truck listening to the music of her subtle pleading.

She was stubborn, self-involved, and ignorant, but that didn't mean she didn't have other qualities…

He hadn't stuck around long enough to see her good traits.

Perhaps he hadn't wanted to see them?

Jaw clenched, she reached for her bag and climbed out of the safety of Betty's four doors and into the night. A cool breeze whipped at her. Curled

strands of sable-brown 3c hair danced to the symphony of crickets.

She undid the French braid of that morning and let her hair sit like a bird's nest over her head and shoulders.

She didn’t see what her neighbors saw in her hair when they would insist, they yearned for hair like hers. Not only was it a mess of tangled curls she tussled with in the mornings before work, but it wasn’t all that long. It fell to the middle of her back, a lot shorter than when she was growing up and her mother would spill different products and creams into it and would comb and brush it with love. She didn’t care for her hair with love, a desire to not look homeless maybe, but certainly not love.

She stopped in her tracks.

A shadow emerged from her porch. She nearly reached for her taser, her

heart caught in her throat, a chill in her veins. It wasn't a faceless killer in a bid to do to her what had been done to Blake Campbell.

Since when did she get startled by the cases she worked? That was never something she'd had to worry about, why now? She didn't want to admit it, but there was a chance she could be getting too invested with the Campbell murder investigation.

"Did I scare you, Naomi?" Detective Olson bit down on her cheek but shook her head.

"No, you didn't, sweetie." She jogged up the porch stairs and opened the door for Tuscany, her fourteen-year-old neighbor. "Can't sleep?"

"Mom's smoking, thought I would take my asthmatic ass out of there and not, you know, die." Rachel hit the wall lights and basked her living room with life. Her home on 9th Street

wasn't a big one, the living room and adjoined kitchen were the highlights of the place. White chocolate brick walls lined the living room giving the biscuit floorboards ample opportunity to shine. She had quotes up on the wall—Tuscany's choosing—and plants on shelves—those were all her. The couch had been half-off at a target and the pinewood coffee table, she'd inherited from her mother. It was now a spot for unread Cosmopolitan magazines that confidently reminded her that she wasn't going to experience multiple orgasms like many women ought to at her age.

She shrugged off her coat, tossing it on a chair by the dining table, a small round fir table with two matching chairs—they'd also been on sale. "Had anything to eat?" She'd asked because despite not feeling it on the ride down from long prairie road, she was famished.

“Do leftovers count?”

“Tuscany, honey, how long have you known me? No, leftovers don’t count.” She reached for an apron on a hook on the grey walls by the cedar cabinets.

“You seemed to enjoy my Bake n’ Shark last time you had it, wanna give that another go?”

Tuscany who’d been leaned against the island counter, shrugged, putting away her phone. “Sure, why not.”

“Still remember how to make it?”

“Fish, bake, vegetables and a pepper sauce. Of course, I still remember.” Tuscany said as matter of fact and pulled open the fridge door.

Shaking her head, Rachel Naomi turned on the stove and reached for a pan.

Why couldn't Mathew have seen this part of her?

Nenny May

CHAPTER TWO

That afternoon, He hadn't known where else to go. The air had oozed of anguish and sweat for some reason. That irked him. After his fleeting conversation with Detective Olson, he found himself two doors down, and past the rows of chairs annoyingly placed.

He didn't know the Sherriff all that well, Hell! He didn't even know what he was doing. But whatever it was, he was letting his legs guide him and his lips spew out whatever they damn well please!

He only knew the man through his late father Christopher Campbell who'd in a sense taken the at the time young rookie officer under his wing.

And Paul had met this man time and time again growing up, and whenever their paths would cross, Paul would be stuck in his fathers' timber exporting company's headquarters smack dab in the middle of Tillamook County, and they would always be on the third floor. Many at times Paul would be slumped on the couch in his father's sizable office, forced to bury his pre-teenage head in homework. Pierce had been the only other source of entertainment to the young Paul before he would get to return to their home in the evenings.

Clicking his desert tongue against the roof of his mouth, he didn't bother to knock on what had been a cracked door. He was after all a familiar face. "Sherriff Peirce?" He asked merely out of courtesy. This was a man who'd taken him on his first ride-along at fourteen.

"Who's askin'?" The middle-aged man's head rose from where he'd been scribbling something in a booklet.

The years were not good to him. In his youth, Paul would admit, Pierce was quite the ladies' man. Those ride-alongs' weren't just ride-alongs'... The ladies that would cling to Pierce weren't there just because of the squad car... although thinking back he had to admit that was a bonus.

Paul inched closer and helped himself to a seat. The worn leather creased beneath his weight. "My, my... How long has it been... Peter is it?" Paul's fingers curled in a fist beneath the table. The last he needed was to come off as disrespectful or standoffish, especially since he needed a favor from someone so high up. He bit down on his tongue swallowing the bitter taste in his mouth.

"Paul." He corrected, meekly. He dreaded the thought of being frail. Anything that associated him with weakness ached in his bones. With his broad size, generous height, and swollen arms, feeble should be the

last thing to cross a person's mind in his presence.

"How can I help you, son?" Sherriff Pierce paused then added; "I'm sorry for your loss. It must be a difficult pill to swallow considering how she passed on." Sherriff Pierce wasn't all that young, not anymore. He'd bid farewell to his youth as depicted by the faint salt sprinkled in his pepper hair that sat atop his receding hairline. Was it the stress? He could bet top dollar this man wasn't up to fifty. If he did his math right, he ought to be in his mid-forties. It was a shame he looked much, much older. This was only worsened by his sagging cheeks and double chin. Paul resisted the urge to shake his head in dismay.

"You've known my family, Sheriff. You know when my father died, how much that hurt me. I couldn't believe someone in my life was gone... I mean he was there since when I was born, and I was always

with him after school." Paul cleared his throat. "You remember those days, those months where the three of us would be at Campbell's House of Timber. You would help me with my homework, and he would teach you how to be a successful... whatever it is you wanted to be." He cracked his fingers beneath the table, his head ducked. "You've gotta remember." He waited for a reply that never came, eyes burning a hole in the wall behind the Sherriff. "Whatever. Bottom line is you knew what I went through we don't need to hatch up old wounds. But I have new scars and I need your help." He ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "I want to know what really happened to my mother. I wanna know who did it? I want to know as much as I can. She didn't deserve this. She was brutally murdered and I as her son, can't let her killer walk away scot free. I need to do something..."

"I'm going to stop you right there. I can't tell you I understand your situation. That would be offensive on multiple levels. I don't understand and I never will. You lost both your parents and you're still so young. You don't deserve that, and all I can offer is my condolences. But what I can tell you is I comprehend your statement. You don't want to feel useless while waiting for an investigation that could take weeks, months and at its worst years even though we have officers working overtime and trust me we do. I have my best men and women on the job."

"Best women?" Paul was skeptical. If the Sherriff was referring to their lead Detective, then he wasn't too comfortable with the direction his mother's investigation was headed. His mother's investigation, his mother had been murdered. The thought made him queasy.

"I know Detective Olson is young but she's effective. And this isn't her

first murder investigation for that matter. Tested her skills a while back on another case... the details aren't going to interest you, but she was phenomenal."

Paul Campbell remained unconvinced. He'd spent less than five minutes with that woman, and she'd come off as lackadaisical in her work. He wasn't too comfortable with her on the case. The chances of her losing interest in his mother's case were much too high. He would have sleepless nights with someone like her on this case. No, there had to be someone else, someone more engaged.

"Look, there has to be someone else that could handle this." Paul leaned back in his seat and ran a finger through the collar of his red polo shirt. The topic was unsettling, to say the least. "I don't want to sound misogynistic or racist; I am all about women in high positions, especially our ebony beauties... not that I think

she's beautiful in an unprofessional way..." His head fell into his palms. He eluded a groan that had a roaring chuckle bubbling from the Sherriff.

"Son, I understand you right now. You think she's too at ease to handle your case. She can give off that impression,"

"Exactly!" Paul chimed his eyes a resemblance of hazelnut on a milk bed glimmered in fading excitement.

"I understand that, but here's the deal..." The Sherriff leaned in closer to Paul. "I'm gonna' let you in on a little secret. Now, I don't want this getting around, you know how word travels in a town as small as Tillamook, okay?" The middle-aged man's eyes shifted side to side as if someone else were listening in to their conversation. "And I especially don't want this getting back to her. She's going to have my head on a platter if she knows. But she doesn't work alone because we need someone else sparking that dull flame in her during

investigations. She might seem apathetic at first but she's damn smart and damn effective. And I give you my word, son. Your mother's case is in fine hands." Sherriff Pierce leaned back in his seat and flung open his booklet once more.

He was at a dead end. The Sherriff wasn't going to budge. He would have to make do with Detective Olson on his mother's case. But the moment she slipped up and he caught wind of a document or evidence going missing because of negligence on her part... he would do everything in his power to get her off the case and off the force.

"I can offer you something." The Sherriff flipped through his booklet; thick salt eyebrows dipped in concentration. "Now I can't guarantee it'll help, but it'll definitely ease your mind on this case." He ripped out a page and slid it across the table. "Psychologist Lisa Patterson. Best in the business in my opinion. She's going to help you out with this pent-

up anxiety you have concerning this case."

"I get it." Paul grabbed the paper rather roughly. "You want to get me off your back so your officers can work." He nodded to himself, his tongue poking the inner of his right cheek. "I'll check out your psychologist, but you can't get me off your back. I am going to be on top of my mother's case because I hate to say it, the justice system is fucked, and I'll be damned if I let them mess up my family's case." He pulled himself up and leaned against the Sherriff's table adding; "Few sessions and I'm back on your neck. Until a killer is caught, I'm going to be this precinct's worst nightmare."

She was gone. His mother was dead.

He could feel it. The color draining from his face.

Killed.

The night had spread a blackness that seemed intent on slipping in through the hotel bay windows.

The room was small. Basic. It had a four-post bed, king sized, two beige arm chairs in the corner by the fifty-inch television settled on a stand that now held his watch and Claire Fisher's box of tampons. The screen radiated a darkness, and he couldn't help but gaze at it as if he didn't know what he would see if he were to turn it on.

Her face… the thought was a wandering soul, lost admits the chaos.

He couldn't get his mind to tire itself out.

There was an empty fridge by the bed, above which sat used coffee mugs and plates piled and stained. It was their doing, most of it was Claire… he didn't exactly have an appetite.

Was this grief?

Paul tossed in the cheap hotel bed till he was on his back, glaring at the ceiling, sheets muffling beneath him. Muscles tensed, he'd listened to Claire Fisher's soft and subtle snores, fingers curled around the plain sheets. They hadn't gotten a duvet. The air conditioner wasn't strong enough to warrant that. She groaned, the sound, faint. He didn't intend to rouse her.

Lips drawn between his teeth, he hoped she didn't stir.

He'd heard it again, her soft tired breathing. His shoulders eased.

They were as acquainted as estranged cousins. Grief, his old distant friend, the one from junior high. It almost seemed to hit him with a force harder than the last time it had paid him a visit. His grip on the sheets loosened.

How in hell could his mother be dead? He resisted the urge to chuckle bitterly to himself. That would certainly wake Claire. He didn't need that. His mother didn't have the best

reputation. He should have seen it coming. Blake Campbell was loathed amongst her peers. His family was shunned. They were the black sheep. His mother was called all sorts of things, a skank, a whore… his father was a predator… and he? Well, the media couldn't seem to leave the harmless kid out of the mix… he was the untrained son, the spoiled kid suspended from Tillamook Junior high before it was even cool…

Tillamook Times, The State of Tillamook, neither sought the true story. They longed for a scandal and his family was the flowing river. They turned a blind eye to Blake Campbell as the woman who'd fought to retain their family home despite the death of her husband. To Paul, that was a story he would flip through if he were to come across it in the paper… Not the tale of a family in shambles.

From Grace to Grass, Tillamook Times had covered in an article the downfall of the Campbell name, the

brand to be buried with the deceased Christopher. Their manor on the verge of being snatched from their hungry fingers. Paul never once perceived his home as a mansion, to him it was home and nothing more. He was born there. He'd lived there almost his whole life. It held his games, his sporting gear, and his family—something he'd never given a second thought until like a rug pulled from underneath him, it was gone. If only he'd known just how much that house cost… Undeniably, it was bigger than other houses he'd been to, but a naïve child, he never once settled down to consider it.

Until, he had. And a new light had been cast on his mother. She wasn't the villain locals made her out to be. She was a mother who'd had the world against her and did whatever the hell it took to give him a suitable life.

Sleep was lost on him. And even still he'd forced his eyes shut,

overlooking the churning in his stomach.

Christopher with Campbell's House of Timber had been able to shoulder a fraction of the cost for their home, but after his passing and Campbell's Antiques nearly going under, it was a miracle they hadn't been kicked to the curb.

Paul Campbell's mind just couldn't shut off. He didn't know what time it was… There was a clock over his head. Above the bed. It wasn't ticking, the fingers were gliding over the numbers. He'd pegged it off as a tacky attempt to bring the room to life. He didn't bother to check.

He couldn't imagine being homeless… Blake would have been shunned seeking shelter from Christopher Campbell's sisters. Paul's own cousins didn't value him. To them, he was that cousin, the one they invited for gatherings because they had to.

He winced, his bottom lip wobbling. The green monster sauntered out of the corner and joined him by the bed, and with it, an undeniable envy that sat heavy on his chest. Both Claire's parents Avni and Joseph Fisher were still alive and kicking. Residing in New Delhi. She had a family, her three sisters Krisha, Rebecca, and Mayra and her two brothers Jay and Alex. And what did he have? A dead body he couldn't bring himself to claim. He'd tried. After Claire had made him promise he would. He'd made his way out of the main building of the Sherriff's department, and beneath the blonde strands of the morning sun, he'd kicked against his decision. He hadn't been ready to sit with what was left of his mother. A mere carcass carved and branded by a killer and county morgue.

She didn't deserve that. No one deserved that.

Anger seethed within him.

He bit down on his bottom lip.

Blake had done more than just give him a roof over his head. As the days turned to months after his father's cremation, he'd gotten closer to her. He'd learned about her grief; it hadn't been perfect, but he'd noticed she would still talk to Christopher as if he were there with her. And even after she'd confided in him about this, he'd caught her, day after day, singing to Christopher's portrait, taking it out for morning walks as she would her late husband in his last days. Why couldn't the papers, the news stations for once see her as the victim?

The minute they'd gotten wind of her unusual behavioral patterns, she was once more the subject of ridicule on the headlines. From the Business Front to the Looney Bin…

He blamed himself. He ought to have said or done something to nip it in the bud.

Paul kicked off the plain sheets, his skin scorching. He hadn't been

sweating, but he was sure it was only a matter of time. He sat up, his back pressed against the headrest.

He was never going to be old enough to deal with the loss of a loved one. And especially not in this manner.

Ten stab wounds.

He placed a hand over his lips, the other on the mattress, palms flat.

Four lined her right rib.

He lowered his head.

She'd been strangled to death.

The first of many warm damp tears streaked down his taut cheek.

Two gashes between her breasts.

He forced a breath to his lungs, jerking his head and glaring at Claire's rising and falling torso beneath the sheets.

What he felt in his chest wasn't envy… it had morphed into something darker, something that seethed within him. Jealousy perhaps? She could fucking sleep despite his world crumbling around him. Her

world continued to spin unphased by the anguish that fed off him. He didn't bother to hold back the torrent. It had been building up inside for far too long.

Blake Campbell was supposed to be at his wedding. He was going to make her promise not to bring the damn picture of his father she carried around. He could swear the older that woman got, the tighter her grip on that thing became.

He sat up and flung his legs over the side of the bed. He wasn't going to get any sleep.

In the darkness, his body raked with swallowed sobs. It burned, everything burned, it was a dull ache from the inside.

"She was a fucking victim," He whispered. Blake had always been a victim. he drew in a long breath and blew out his cheeks.

He reached for his phone he'd kept on the end table and winced at

the glaring screen; he'd been tempted to shut it off.

It was too late; he'd been entranced by it.

The screen was overwhelmed with messages, condolences, and inquiries, from distant cousins deliberating just what happened to their aunt Blake… it wasn't as if they cared.

There was a message that stood out amidst the rest, one that piqued his interest.

From an unregistered number.

And reading the few words on his notification bar, it had been a message from the lead Detective on his mother's case.

What the hell did she want? He'd thought rather displeasingly as his fingers clicked over the message bubble.

We need to talk about Blake Campbell, is it okay if you can come down to my office tomorrow?

She had real guts reaching out to him in this manner. What did she

want to ask that she couldn't find an answer to at the scene of the crime? Had she come across some new information? His eyebrows eased at the idea.

He was antsy.

What if the rumors were true? That there was more to his mother than he'd known?

Because despite not wanting to admit it, if someone had done this, they'd had to have had a reason.

Ten stab wounds were a personal attack. Right? She'd been strangled as if to add icing to the bitter cake.

This couldn't be a regular breaking and entering. No, this person had been agitated with her. From what he'd heard she'd been chased from the kitchen to the master bedroom where she'd fallen, her back on the bed.

The facts were troubling.

She was the target and that made him nauseous.

He couldn't sit still. Each nerve seemed flustered.

Possibly, and this was a long shot, but what if someone had gone after her because of Christopher…? No, his father had enemies, but even then, they'd never been the type to commit a murder. This was a personal attack… Someone had gone after his mother in particular, and they'd succeeded.

He needed to take matters into his own hands, the Sherriff's department was incompetent.

Their lead Detective… what had her name been… Olson or something… didn't seem capable, and Sherriff Pierce could barely remember Paul's name… trusting them didn't seem worth his time.

He leaped to his feet.

He had an idea. But he wasn't sure just how to kick it into gear.

He ran a hand over his stubbled, chiseled chin.

He would invest in a private investigator.

Where would he find one…? They didn't have fliers hanging about, neither did they have a particular website he could log into.

And even if he did, how would he know which one to trust…?

He couldn't say he knew anyone that knew anyone, he was as much a local to Tillamook as Claire was, that is to say, they were both aliens, despite him being born and raised in Tillamook County.

Restless, he paced the room, deliberating just how much from their savings he would need for his venture.

"Do you want to talk about it, or are you good burning a hole in the floor?" Claire sat up, groggy. She'd flung her hands over her head and let out a mighty yawn.

Like a deer caught in headlights, Paul paused in place, staring at the outline of her body in the barely lit

room. Her curves were just one of the reasons he'd been drawn to her.

It was the first time she was getting the opportunity to shut her eyes. He didn't need her awake. If anything, he'd found a chaotic solace in pacing, planning, and anticipating even if he felt like Detective Olson's office, a mess.

His fiancé hadn't been prepared to up and travel with him to Tillamook at the end of a busy shift at the University of Portland Community College. He hadn't invited her. He'd merely told her that he would be making an unscheduled trip to Tillamook, his return was indefinite.

Hearing this, she hadn't packed, she'd just caught up with him at the airport and picked up an over-the-counter ticket, and hopped on the plane.

Thinking back to that, his chest was overwhelmed with affection for the tired woman.

"This is someone we saw just a couple months ago over Christmas, Claire." He said, breathless, running both hands through his hair and letting them fall roughly at either of his sides. "Over fucking Christmas." He echoed.

"I know." Claire said.

"She didn't know then that this was going to happen, for fuck sakes I didn't know." His voice cracked.

"This wasn't something either of us could predict." She wiped her eyes with the back of her palm.

They couldn't predict the crime, but they could predict the sentence.

Homicide, Claire thought. Legally, whoever did this would pay with their blood. The code was their spine, section 1111(b). Blake Campbell's killer would be ripe for the death sentence. They just needed to know who this monster could be?

"But I should have been here…" Paul continued to pace their hotel carpet.

They had with them limited funds; they hadn't splurged on the best hotel. They'd settled on a little on 3rd Street by Ocean Avenue. They didn't know how long they would be in Tillamook. They were walking on eggshells trying not to max out their credit cards.

"We live in Portland, Paul, and you didn't have any reason to be here,"

His head tilted.

"She was my mother; I didn't need a reason to be around her."

And she was her mother-in-law.

Claire shuddered.

"You're a grown man, even she would have been bothered with you around her out of the blue."

"Bullshit!" Paul spat. "I was all she had left. After my father's passing, she poured herself into… Pro…Campbell's Antiques and worked well into the night, day after day." He paused; his breath caught in his throat. "I could have visited more;

I could have been closer to her… oh God!"

"Paul," Claire called. "I understand you,"

He frowned. She'd struck a nerve, shit! "No, you fucking don't." He chuckled to himself. If he had a penny for how many times, he'd heard that in the span of time it had taken him to fly from Portland to Tillamook… "You're just saying that because you want me to calm the hell down, well I can't… I didn't have siblings growing up, Claire, she was all I had after Christopher's heart attack, so don't sit there and bullshit me." He ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "I'm fucking jealous of you, you have such a big family, three sisters, two brothers and both your parents are ALIVE!" He took a step towards the bed, towards her. "Both my parents are dead; my dear fiancé and I don't fucking know my cousins… I…" He heaved a sigh welcoming an uncomfortable silence.

Blake Campbell had promised to pick out wedding dresses with Claire…

She sat pin straight in the bed. She hadn't said anything after his outburst.

"I'm scared, Claire." His voice sounded brittle to his own ears and wailed of weakness. He dreaded it.

"Scared?" She pulled the sheets further up her frame.

"I'm scared of what was done to her…" He joined her by the edge of the bed. It dipped with his weight. She couldn't say she could see him all that well, but from what she could see, he'd had his head hung low on broad shoulders, legs apart, elbows on his knee in a way that his hands fell between his parted legs. "I'm scared of accepting that this is my life now." He caught his head in his palms.

Christopher hadn't just left them with a home they couldn't afford, he'd left behind the debts Campbell's house of Timber had accumulated

over the years. Lawsuits that when he'd for the first time met Claire, they'd sorted through and settled. Paul had done the best he could to pick up the pieces of Christopher Campbell's passing. Knowing he would have to do all of that again with Blake Campbell's death gnawed at him.

"I'm an orphan, Claire. Sure, I won't be taken to an orphanage or anything like that, but I don't have anyone else. I have no one," His head rose and in his eyes were leaking pools.

She reached for his forearm, he pulled away. If she'd been affected by this, he hadn't been able to see in the darkness. And from what he could make out with the outline of her body, she'd retreated into her former position with her back pressed against headboard.

"Why her?" Paul asked, his jaw clenched.

Claire hadn't had an answer to that. "I was just trying to help." She said instead.

What was he to do, apologize for lashing out? His mother was stabbed and strangled by a killer no one knew. He had a right to lash out.

"And I was just trying to wrap my head around my mother being killed."

Paul hadn't been looking forward to the moment the sun would awaken from its slumber. When it had and light had spilled in through the windows and past the thin cloth the hotel tried to pass off as curtains, hope for a pleasant outcome for the day he had ahead, diminished. The morning promised as much as the night.

He and Claire Fisher weren't on talking terms.

They'd maneuvered their temporary living space in taut silence and when he'd parted from her, he'd

long for the soft feel of her lips on his in a goodbye kiss.

Then he remembered, she'd tried to quench the flame of grief that burned in him like a wildfire. He didn't want to be quenched.

She hadn't had it in her to keep her eyes open and her body upright. Minutes into their conversation and she'd begun to tilt, jolt awake and tilt again. From her body language, she'd wanted to be with him, awake as a form of support. He hadn't asked for it. Quite frankly, he didn't need her to. She would just make matters worse.

Paul had said nothing as he'd lowered her into the blankets. He hadn't placed a kiss on her forehead. He'd felt odd breaking a pattern.

He had to prove a point.

Even With barely getting a nick of sleep, Paul had set out for the day ahead. His first stop, the Tillamook Wellness Center.

His first thought on arrival to the Wellness Center had been the narrow lot and barely available parking. It was 8:23 A.M. on a Tuesday, how many people needed to see a therapist?

It would be amusing if he would have to wait...

Nah, that couldn't be likely, how much did these people even make?

Wasn't business strained for them because of how much information was on the internet? People could diagnose themselves and solve their own problems with a few clicks on Google.

When he'd eventually pulled, he and Claire’s too big Sienna—a car he’d made only half the down payments on—into a rather petite parking spot; without managing a scratch if he would add, he’d set off

on a rather quiet walk to the front of the four-story glass building.

It was properly polished and shimmered in the morning sun. A sign hung above the door that read, *Tillamook Wellness Center* in bold matte red. It was in a sense welcoming. The automated doors slid apart and welcomed him to a busy front desk.

The thought he'd most dreaded was a reality.

Because from what it seemed waiting for Lisa Patterson was going to be the least of his problems. The mere bureaucracy of getting his appointment approved seemed daunting.

There were more people lined up at the front desk than he'd seen at the Sherriff's office.

Shit!

He'd joined the end of the queue.

Not too long into his wait, behind a family with their pre-teenage daughter, a man in a white suit had approached a restless Paul Campbell. Clearing his throat, the man asked. "Have you picked a number sir?" He was heavy on his Italian accent.

A short trip to Italy after college earned Paul the opportunity to pick up a thing or two about their culture, their food, and their wines. Oh, did he adore the aged Italian wine. But that was off-topic.

What exactly did the man mean by a number? Like they did at the phone store? Or at the bank? He could tell the place eluded class but wasn't this a tad over the top? The foyer already reverberated the name of the building. Though the colors used were rather mature, he could find himself feeling soothed in wait. Brick decorated the wall behind the receptionist's desk; grey adorned the wall to their right and beige to their left. Looking around, he'd noticed

waiting areas strategically assembled by the door to each office. Couches, armchairs, and coffee tables, as well as pictures, lamps, bookshelves, and plants, made up these waiting areas. Many of which were occupied. If Lisa Patterson worked here, he could only imagine the bill. He could only imagine her salary. Here he thought he was helping her out by showing up... She didn't need him. Not in the slightest.

"Okay, umm... humor me, where can I get a number?" The man gestured to a machine on the wall by the entrance.

He was instructed how to get a number even if he'd shooed the man time and time over. The digits on the piece of paper had his jaws clenching. He was already late for his appointment. He was going to completely miss it if he had to wait to be the forty-fifth number in line to be attended to.

He couldn’t wait.

He would much rather return to the morgue and claim his mother.

He hardly knew if there was a timeline before the body would be removed… was that possible? His mind was a jumbled mess. One he would find a way to get a hold of, without this… psychologist.

That also meant a visit to the lead Detective on his mother's case.

How much could she have uncovered within the span of a day?

Detective Olson hadn't been alone in her office. Neither could he recognize the man that had been perched in a chair at the other end of her desk, both their heads buried in the papers scattered about her desk. The man had been leaned back in the chair, a folder opened up before him, one leg crossed over the other. Detective Olson behind her desk like a throne had tossed on a pair of reading glasses and been straining

through a thick print-out. This wasn't going to change his perception of her. Not until he'd seen results.

He knocked on the open door, a courtesy move. Both heads jerked in his direction. He straightened and cleared his throat. Detective Olson discarded her glasses on the table and the man seemed unbothered by Paul's presence. "You… contacted me, last night, you wanted to talk about my mother?"

Or what you'd found regarding her murder?

"You are also wanted for questioning, but that's a discussion we can keep in our back pockets, I wouldn't want to get you all riled up," The man had said, his tone, threatening. He'd placed his crossed leg down, and shoved the folder on Detective Olson's desk.

"Ignore him, Mr. Campbell this is my partner Detective Dawson. We're working together to—"

“Close the book on your mother’s case, catch a killer, and everyone goes home happy.” Paul knew the game Detective Dawson was playing and he wasn’t going to take the bait. Even though both men knew that wasn’t why Paul had driven down to the Sherriff’s department, completely disregarding his appointment with Psychologist Lisa Patterson. Detective Olson’s features seemed swollen with frustration.

“That’s… not correct, we don’t want to just… close the book, what my partner meant to say, was we want to seek justice for Miss. Campbell and make sure her killer pays with every last bit of time he has left. If that’s something you’re interested in, take a seat and we can, get started.” She offered up the only other seat by her table, but Detective Dawson had risen to his feet and rounded her table joining her by her throne. He’d perched himself at ease with his hands shoved in his pockets.

Paul knew his type, typical bad-cop. That wouldn't work on Paul. Intimidation rolled off his back like water off a duck's, how was he going to drum that into the glaring man's ears?

He took Detective Olson up on her offer, lowering himself in the chair Dawson had risen from and Paul had bitten back a chuckle. "This couple thing you have going on, isn't going to faze me, he's the bad-cop and you're the good one, what, did you rehearse this before I came in?" They shared a look of confusion. Detective Dawson cleared his throat.

Detective Olson was flustered. "No, we're not… when I said partners, I didn't mean… we're work partners,"

"Work partners," Detective Dawson echoed with one last delayed glance at Detective Olson.

They weren't the only ones that could play the hard game. They wanted to play good-cop bad-cop,

Paul would play along, but he wouldn't be the nervous wreck.

"Let's make this quick. What would you like to know about my mother?"

"Okay, umm…" Detective Olson flipped through the pages of the document before her. "I had these questions printed out, give me a minute, I'm usually not this… scatter brained." Yet another thing he would add to his reasons to not trust the city's police departments. She couldn't even keep track of her documents. Paul huffed. It usually started small, questions, get misplaced, then what? He would receive a call in the dead of the night that circumstantial articles of evidence had slipped between their fingers?

He was sure, this was yet another reason to invest in a private investigator.

"She wrote down a bunch of questions, and I'm going to let her go

through that, but I'm going to jump straight to the point—"

"Aha!" She called out triumphantly as she adjusted her seat. "Dawson, I would implore you to recall the conversation we had yesterday, regarding control." Detective Olson warned. The man who'd still hand his hands shoved in his pants pocket shrugged her words over his shoulder.

"Mr. Campbell, where were you on the 9th of October between 11:15 P.M. and 2:30 A.M.?" Paul Campbell backtracked.

He chuckled. "You don't think I did it… do you?" The man's stoic features were enough of a response. "She was my mother," He sat up in his seat, mirrored the man's stare. "I didn't kill her."

"I know. I just wanted to get that out of the way. What we really want to know is if your mother had any… what's the word…"

“That’s enough Dawson or so help me,” Detective Olson scowled over her shoulder at the man that didn’t come off as bothered by her words. The man that had taken a hand from his pocket to place on his stubbled chin.

“…sanity points left in her?” His baritone voice returned.

“Dawson!” Detective Olson scolded. “That’s not what we want to know… well it is but we were supposed to build up to that question.” She tried to salvage the situation.

“You’re insinuating that my mother was crazy?”

“Not at all Mr. Campbell—”

“I’m not insinuating. We have medical records, our team of professionals collected from the scene that led us to seek you for… confirmation,”

“Mr. Campbell you have to understand that this is merely procedural, and we would just like to cross that out of the box,”

"She was not crazy," Paul overlooked the desperate Detective Olson. She couldn't even control her colleagues. These were the clowns Sherriff Pierce held in high esteem? He would get better results on his own. They didn't seem to have their act together. "I've seen crazy before. Are you kidding me? This entire precinct is a joke!" His hands flared over his head. "One request," He jabbed a finger in Detective Olson's face. "Find a goddamn killer, that's all I asked and you're playing doctor and trying to find out whether or not she was sane? What if she wasn't sane how does that have anything to do with the killer on the lose? She was stabbed ten times if you can't recall, because I can. And I want a killer caught before Friday, or I'm going to hire someone to do your job for you?"

"What the hell was that?" Rachel Olson asked, her hands spread out

before her in exasperation. This was nothing like what they'd discussed before Mr. Campbell had joined them. Huh, the joke was on her for believing Detective Dawson would follow instructions.

By the door, Detective Dawson had chuckled. He'd peeked out to get the last glance of a retreating Mr. Campbell. "This, Dawson" She gestured to her table, referring to what had just transpired. "Is what I meant by taking control of every situation you're in." He turned to her. From the way, her carved brows had dipped, and eyes wailed in frustration, he'd straightened. She didn't seem half as amused by the situation as he was. "I sounded like I was begging you to listen to me, and in front of the son of our Jane Doe." Detective Dawson had his lips pressed in a thin line. "It's clear you don't give a shit about this case," She pressed her index finger on the table. "But I do, and if you respect

me, Dawson, you will listen to what the hell I have to say." She spat.

"This is why the CSI crew is finding it difficult to loosen up around you," He joined her by the table. "You're taking this too seriously. A woman was murdered, that man's mother. Not yours."

"And so, I should be apathetic because it wasn't my mother?" She wiped her dampened hands on her favorite Macy's work pants—It was a two-piece she'd gotten for less than a hundred bucks, the Blazer and the work pants, both in a bold deep blue. She dreaded the riled up feeling Detective Dawson pumped into her.

"I am not saying you shouldn't care at all; I'm saying don't lump a case on your shoulder, especially a case that has nothing to do with you." He picked up the autopsy report he'd been reading before a disgruntled Paul Campbell had walked in. "That's how you get high blood pressure before your sixty."

“Bullshit, I should, as a matter of fucking fact treat this case as if it were my own. Because, news flash,” She jabbed a finger at her badge on her desk. “I’m the Detective responsible for this case.”

“I feel compelled to remind you,” He’d interjected in a calm tone that had her eyes squeezing shut and her lips parting for a breath. “…that I am also a Detective on this case. And I am here, earlier than I turn it to work normally, reading a fifty-six-year-old woman’s autopsy.”

“Should I congratulate you for being early and doing your job?”

“I’m just saying don’t act like the world is going to end if worst case scenario, the case goes cold on us.”

“You know what, Dawson, I don’t care what you or the rest of the bloody CSI team think of me. I am the boss; their boss and they should fucking fear me. And as for you, I don’t know how you handle murder cases down at the city P.D. but here,

we offer restitution to our clients, and you should start acting like it if you want to keep your place on this case."

"You're threatening to have me kicked off this case? There's a reason I'm here," He closed the file. "This is only your second murder investigation, and you want to kick the man who's closed over a dozen murder investigations off your team?" He'd held her stare. Her eyes were soaked. One more blink and the waiting tears would run down her cheeks. He wasn't moved. "Think carefully about that decision." He rose to his feet. His hands back in his pockets. "I'll be in my office at the City P.D. when you've reached a verdict."

Annabelle Dawson was restless. She couldn't sit still and let her ratings plummet. It had happened

once before, only then, it had cost her more than she'd been willing to pay. She wasn't going to let that happen twice. She'd endured enough sleepless nights. Her job was hanging by a thin thread. Lucy Wilkens with Channel Nine was on top of every news story regarding the deceased Blake Campbell.

Annabelle didn't hate the woman with her botched lips and faux-ass… It's just, if the woman were on fire... Annabelle would drink the last bottle of water.

Channel Six was barely getting any attention, and Simon Neil, the Head News Producer couldn't ignore it. Not only had he been acting like he had a rather hot stick up his ass, his disdain had been boldly imprinted on his forehead.

She had to do something… anything to get the ratings up. Whatever it took to surpass Lucy Wilkens.

And then it hit her, in the dead of the night.

Lucy Wilkens had the latest coverage on the Campbell Murder investigation, Annabelle Dawson was going to take a step back, several steps back and build a story on the life of their deceased.

Restlessness morphed into anticipation, and that Tillamook night in a home on 2nd Street by Douglas Avenue, an idea was born, sleep shoved aside, coffee a loyal partner.

She pushed through the door, her Armani pumps clicking above the wooden floorboards, accompanied by stumping steps, and a second pair of heels gracefully sauntering into the room. Frank Peterson, the studio's Camera Operator had been thrilled to escort her, a black Sony PXW-FS5 camera on his shoulder.

She didn't have anyone else to trust. Down at Channel Six headquarters, her colleagues had begun to anticipate when she would

gather her belongings in drab cardboard boxes and etch her signature on her own resignation letter.

They even made bets to see if Simon Neil would give her the iron boot before then! She wasn't deaf to their breakroom chit-chat.

The job wasn't hers anymore. She needed a miracle.

"The place looks empty," Frank's nasal tone filled her ears.

She turned to him, his jewel-like emerald eyes glimmered with a fading excitement. He couldn't give up on her too! Not him, he was the nice guy who always said 'hi' to her whenever he would walk by her cubicle. He'd even split his jelly doughnut with her last week when someone ate her tuna sandwich… and he *loved* his jelly doughnuts, so that was saying something.

"He's here," She assured him.

The strong scent of liquor and cheap air-freshener smacked her in

the face and she resisted the urge to wince. She took in the room, recalling her night at the desk by her hand-me-down MacBook in her bedroom profiling the business.

He had to be here… he just had to…

"Because if he isn't, Simon Neil is going to give all of us the boot," News Anchor Amanda Hampton said practically reading Anna's mind. Sure, the only reason the Cinnamon tanned woman was there had a thing or two to do with overhearing Annabelle's conversation with Frank and tagging along. But what were good news anchors for if they couldn't eavesdrop on private conversations and follow a story? Anna had never been able to say no to the nosy woman.

One day, she would find the courage to. That day was yet to come. Until then, she was chasing a story, one that brought her to a district bar.

It had a history. American Angels didn't just pop-up in Tillamook on 4th street. It was a family business, owned and run by a neighborhood name, a man, Robert Ellison who'd inherited the bar from his father Benjamin Ellison.

Benjamin in the summer of 1980, founded the business under the name of Tillamook Angels. Beers, music and a good time for the locals, that's what the bar stood for. Business wasn't great on the onset, there were slow days and setbacks that seemed to drag on. Rumors circulating about the district bar on 4th. Substandard and cheap. It was claimed only skanks and delinquents frequent the place.

And even still, Benjamin hadn't been deterred, he'd stuck by the counter, through thick and through thin. However, soon passed away from terminal lung cancer.

The business grieving the loss of its founder was as well on the brink of death, on its last breath when

Benjamin's only son Robert had rebranded to boost traffic. Suited with a new name and target audience, Robert Ellison unveiled a bar that was not only keeping his father's dream alive, but his as well.

Annabelle Dawson needed an exclusive interview with Robert Ellison. Startled that he'd even taken her call at almost midnight, she'd pitched her idea for an interview. He'd been delighted.

"Yuck!" Amanda ran a finger over the stained Walnut table by the entrance. "People frequent this joint?" The preppy woman didn't seem too sure.

"It's usually packed by night time." Annabelle shrugged; her hands shoved in the pockets of her nude-brown trench coat.

"How do you know that? Don't tell me you're one of the regulars?" She'd said it as if it were a bad thing?

"Not me, my brother, Chase."

“The Detective?” Annabelle nodded, her stomach stirring at the sultry smile that made an appearance on Amanda’s heart shaped face. Chase Dawson had made one appearance at the Studio on Madrona Avenue and Amanda hasn’t been able to shut up about him since.

“Anna, if he’s not here, we can talk to someone else.” Frank placed his camera on the marble countertop.

She picked at her fingertips; jaw clenched.

“I want to start at the beginning, Frank.” She met his eyes with her dark brown ones. They weren’t as dark as Chase’s, but to onlookers, they were nearly black. “I promised Simon Neil an in-depth look at the life of Blake Campbell before the murder.” She sounded exasperated. She couldn’t lose her job. She couldn’t be the reason the three of them were out of work. It was possible… Simon Neil was as predictable as a nuclear weapon; he

could throw a fit and get the three of them replaced at the drop of a hat.

The guilt would kill her if she was the reason that happened.

She dropped his gaze and scrutinized her pealed nail polish.

Maybe Frank didn't get it. No one did. "I told you I spoke to him, he's here."

Her eyes squeezed shut, she drew a breath.

She'd had one too many sessions with Lisa Patterson to throw a fit and take a step backwards, especially when it wasn't a step that mattered.

"Who's here?" A door creaked open. Out walked a man with warm beige skin and ash-grey eyes. He'd been dressed in a pair of well-fitting jeans and a collared short-sleeved shirt.

"Mr. Ellison?" Amanda Hampton took the liberty to ask, her 'on-air' voice in full display.

"In the flesh," The man stopped by the bar and smiled.

“Amanda Hampton, Anchor for Channel Six,” She jutted out a manicured hand to shake his.

“You’re not the woman I spoke to last night.” He observed, taking her hand in a firm shake. He’d held Amanda in a hesitant gaze.

“That would be me, Annabelle Dawson, Reporter for Channel Six.” Annabelle didn’t have an ‘on-air’ voice. And at first, her colleagues had referred to her as a cub waiting to get her roar, but having served five years with the channel, it was increasingly clear she was never going to get it.

Perhaps it was like a birthmark? Some people were born with it and others weren’t.

She stepped out of Amanda’s daunting shadow and shook the man’s hand. His grip was strong, but his smile was disarming. “I did my research on this place and I discovered our deceased frequented this bar the days after her husband had

died?" That hadn't been all she'd found out.

She'd also learned that the name American Angels had been inspired by the surge of tourists flocking in and out of Tillamook for the town's creameries and lumber companies. And Robert had aimed at targeting an all-inclusive market of locals and tourists alike in his neighborhood bar.

"She did. And should we get the camera's rolling so I could tell you all about it?" She nodded, grinning and gestured for Frank to do his thing.

Robert guided them to a table for three by the window.

The interior décor Anna had read was aimed at displaying the craftmanship of Tillamook's lumber companies, the walls fitted with the finest strips of dark polished Walnut, the floors planked with a complementing maple finish.

"What can you tell us about the day Blake Campbell walked into your bar for the first time?"

Robert Ellison released a breath. “I sure as hell hadn’t been expecting her.”

Robert had his head ducked; fingers covered with a rag wiping down on a tipsy woman’s mid-afternoon mistake when Blake had walked in for the first time.

Sure, it had been the first time she’d been in his bar, but it wasn’t the first time he’d heard about her.

The overcast skies on the outside had mirrored her downcast demure walking in. And despite that, her presence alone had the small bar in an uproar.

Her eyes had run over the faces in the room as if doing a head count. With slumped shoulders, and thin long legs that seemed to weigh a ton,

she made her way further into the petite bar.

People in Tillamook liked to talk and whenever she was around, locals didn't bother to hide their talents. Gossip flew from table to table, till it had gotten to the bar.

She was believed to have killed her husband for his money.

Robert shook his head. The claims got more and more ludacris each time he bothered them a listening ear.

So, what if she did? How was that enough to make the headlines?

That was the problem with small towns, they didn't have anything newsworthy, so they made the most miniscule and pointless things news worthy.

The pasty man at the farthest end of the bar, the one who'd whispered

beneath his breath about the latest claims against the Campbell widow, had been stealing glances at her over the paper he'd had opened in front of him.

He wasn't fooling anyone. His thick rimmed glasses were nearly down the bridge of his crooked nose—looked like the kind of guy regularly in a fist fight or the other despite his age. His brandy brown eyes twitching between the grieving woman and whatever the Tillamook Times considered content.

Tables engaged in a hushed whisper, one the petite blonde seemed to turn a deaf ear to.

She was not only a beauty, but a walking scandal.

In Tillamook, that was entertainment gold.

Clothed from the top of her head to the sole of her feet in black, a Moncler halter-neck knee-length, paired with Saint Lauren leather pumps and an Ann Guise Silk veil, she didn't need to explain what half of Tillamook knew already. She was grieving her late husband, Christopher Campbell. And in the most stylish way she knew how.

Robert wasn't one to judge but he wasn't deaf either. He'd heard as much about her as the next-guy—unfortunately, the next guy was peeping Tom whose glasses he could bet would glide the remaining distance down the man's coarse face—Thirty-two and widowed with a son for a man that was more than twice her age.

"Martini, please," Her voice was breathy, broken. She'd hoisted her lean frame onto a barstool. He'd never heard it before.

“Coming right up,” Robert whirled, reached for a bottle of Gin, vermouth and a lemon, all the while thinking, she didn’t deserve this… the whispers, the scrutinizing gazes, all because she made some off kilter decisions?

“My condolences,” He’d said as he poured two-and-a-half ounces of gin into the shaker. She’d shrugged, her eyes fixed on a spot he’d missed on the counter, he was tempted to reach for the rag and wipe down on the stained marble. He was however, too focused on the way her lips had been opening and closing. How the hell was she able to remain composed in a room full of gossips? Since she’d sat down, Robert had heard three women snicker… that couldn’t be healthy for her mental state.

She had something she wanted to get off her chest.

She needed a listening ear.

He didn't have anything better to do with his afternoon. He didn't mind being that listening ear.

"I hear he was a good man," He offered. It wasn't as if their lives had been out of the media's hawk eyes. It hadn't. Everything their family went through; entertainment stations had carried as the latest headlines. They were Tillamook's own royal family.

She nodded.

"He was, and, please, don't believe what the papers have to say…I loved that man… even if he was… well… you know," He poured in half an ounce of dried vermouth and an equal serving of olive brine and begun to shake.

"I believe you…" He said between shakes, pausing to catch his breath. "…after all, they're your feelings."

“Yeah, they are,” She looked up at him. Her reddened eyes had glimmered with true satisfaction at his words and her lips had twitched into a small smile. It warmed something in him.

She was beyond beautiful, not that he was looking, but… her eyes were a radiant blue despite being tear-shut, hooded and clouded by grief, her cheeks flushed, and features firm. She was a face destined to linger on the minds of locals. “My friends, they’re all convinced I was with him for the money…” He handed the chilled cocktail glass to her. She didn’t reach for it, but reached a hand into her hair and pulled her veil, placing it on the counter.

“Were you?”

“No, no.” She waved her hands out in front of her, radiant blues widened. “It didn’t even start that way.” He poured the content of the

shaker into her glass and finished it off with a lemon wedge.

"Wanna tell me how it started?"

She hadn't gotten to. And he'd promised himself he would pick up where they left off but that opportunity never came.

A man almost as notable as Christopher Campbell had joined her by the bar. Of course, a man in her social circle had snatched her attention.

A single glance was all Robert had needed to match a name to the face of the naturally white-haired man chumming up to the widowed Blake Campbell like a vulture after a kill. Much like Robert, he'd offered his condolences, introduced himself as Richard Dean, an associate in the Tillamook House of Timber, a colleague of her deceased husband, and son of the Dean family—a

dynasty behind creameries in Tillamook—and he'd entertained her in a conversation about Christopher, reminiscing over a corporate life with the late Campbell.

She'd been instantly enthralled, blue eyes shimmering, fixed on Richard's easy-going features.

Robert hadn't intended to eavesdrop on their conversation, he couldn't help if the man's roaring voice had made it harder for the bartender to mind his business.

"Robert," A voice called from the other end of the bar. A woman, a waitress, Dylan Jenkins. Her voice dropped to her whisper once he was within earshot.

"You can't do that," She had her hands crossed over her chest.

"What in god's name do you mean," He wasn't a good liar. That didn't stop him from trying.

"Stop eavesdropping."

"I'm not…" She held him in a skeptical glare. She was a honey blonde, with brown eyes and perfectly plucked eyebrows. He'd worked with her for years since his father's passing, since the rebranding, since inheriting American Angels. He shrugged. "…anymore, but you know what men are like here, they'll take advantage of her." Who better to know what a man is capable of than a man? He knew what Tillamook men were like, he knew what he was like once.

"So?" Her hands dropped to her side and she sauntered past him to the front of the counter where a man was placing the $5 bill for his lady-friend's Long Island Ice Tea.

“Of course, you don’t mind, you don’t have a conscience, but I do. This poor woman has already been through it,”

“And you think, you, a bartender from an average family can protect a wealthy widow?” He clenched his jaw. She was right. The man she was sitting next to worked in the lumber industry and was from a creamery family, Robert couldn’t compete. Richard had wedged himself in two of Tillamook’s strongest industries. But he wasn’t going to be that average bartender forever. He had big plans. Plans he knew she wouldn’t believe in.

That didn’t stop him from keeping an eye on Blake from his post behind the counter.

Four martinis’ later, and she’d let her hair loose from the bun she’d pulled it into. It had fallen in long waves over her shoulder, and

thumping her feet to the music blaring through the speakers, her new found buddy had leaped from his stool taken her hands in his and had begun exploring the dance floor.

Robert hadn't been the only one who'd had his eyes on her. Many of his regulars hadn't been able to focus on anything else.

"Let her go, she's going to be fine," Dylan had said, joining where Robert had been leaned against the counter watching the pair laugh the evening away.

Had that been what she'd wanted? To laugh as though her husband of over ten-years hadn't passed away in her home?

That should have been him.

On that dance floor with her.

Making her smile and throw caution to the wind.

But it wasn't and he couldn't deny he'd been filled with a seething rage.

Richard Dean had a bad enough reputation in Tillamook, not only had he been linked to multiple drug related charges, he'd been accosted for assault as well.

"He's bad for her, Dylan,"

"And you're better?"

"Hell yeah!" He boomed earning a few curious glances. He was agitated she even needed to ask.

"Christopher was bad for her, everyone in Tillamook thought so, but she seemed to care a whole lot about the dead man,"

"Where are you driving at?" He was getting tired of their conversation.

"Who's to say she won't be happy with, Dean?"

Again, she was right. She was always right. He couldn't say if she would be happier as his friend or friends with the ex-con, but he couldn't help but remain bothered… why had she sought the attention of a man so soon after her husband's passing?

He'd completely missed his number by the time he'd returned to the Tillamook Wellness Center. He

hadn't intended to catch up with it. Once he'd gotten the opportunity, he'd leaned over the counter and requested to speak with Lisa Patterson.

"Miss. Patterson is with a client at the moment, if you have an appointment with her then we can go ahead and verify that with the system." The woman at the other end of the desk smiled up at him. She was a lean makeup-caked woman, in her mid to late thirties, older than him. She'd looked up at him with eyes that would turn icy if he didn't have a good enough reason to be there. He tensed his shoulders. He would have been less agitated had her voice not sounded like nails against a blackboard.

"Here's the thing, I had an appointment, but I missed it,"

"I'm sorry sir, you can go ahead and schedule another appointment, and if you're feeling creative you can

access our website or our mobile app."

"Sherriff Pierce booked my last appointment," She seemed to deliberate his words.

"You're with the Sherriff's Department?"

"Not exact—"

"I'm not taking any more clients, Julie," A woman paused in her tracks. She'd been sauntering through the door hung open by the waiting region. She was tall, endowed in all the right places with enough to spare, with skin that gave Rachel Olson a run for her money. Melatonin wasn't shy on her and she'd worn it with a boldness that radiated. A warm and floral fragrance trailed her. He cleared his throat.

"That's fine, Miss. Patterson but there's this man, claims to be with the Sherriff's department." Lisa Patterson evaluated Paul Campbell and reached into her pocket for her phone. She'd typed something on the screen and sent it back where it came from.

"Sherriff Pierce insisted I see you," Her espresso brown skin and generous height piqued his curiosity. Her eyes were amber despite her skin. She had to have Caucasian roots. Though faint, there had to be. She was exactly his type, out of his league. He sought for women that would huff at the idea of going to bed with him. That way, he relished in the chase and lavished in the sweaty, milky outcome of a dying passion. But those were the days before he'd been saddled down.

"Go wait in my office, second floor, third door to your right. If you can't find it ask around. If my last patient hasn't left the room yet find yourself a seat outside and wait." With that said, she'd continued her journey towards the exit.

He followed her instructions and took the stairs to the second floor.

Bright. That was his first impression on the second floor of the Wellness Center.

Windows lined the left side of the building; a sitting area swallowed the middle of the floor and doors lined the right. Beige formed the foundation of the décor as it branded the walls. Motivational quotes had been framed and hung on the walls. Informational banners had been collected on a wooden notice board by the stairs, a board he was subtly drawn to.

Hardwood had been spread beneath his feet.

Light poured in from the floor to ceiling windows.

He'd journeyed across the waiting area and past the desk of what seemed to be the floor secretary, she'd called after him.

"I'm here for Dr. Lisa Campbell." He was here for a psychologist. The odds of that happening had the scenario not called for it, were slim. He was a firm believer in his own strengths and having a stable mind was always one of his strengths. Claire in a way shared his disbelief in

psychologists. She rather advocated for Hindu mantras to soothe her rattled nerves.

The stout pale woman returned to her seat and back to her computer. “That’s fine, take a seat and I’ll get your details in a bit,” Her tone was calm. She’d stretched her hand out, directing him to the waiting area.

It was a circle of armchairs spread out. In the middle was a sculpture. His heart lurched. How much was consultation going to cost him? Between what he and Claire had saved up for their wedding, he doubted he would be able to cover the cost of a place like this. This was a lot to take in.

He’d settled on a seat by the window. It was looking out into the city. Small town, Tillamook, there was nothing much to see that he hadn’t already taken in growing up. Into his pocket, Paul had reached for his phone, typing up a reply to a burdened Claire Fisher who’d

inquired into his day in a text. She couldn't even give him the cold shoulder for a day. He chuckled to himself. The woman from the desk had approached him and collected his insurance and medical details.

He never got to send his reply to Claire.

Not too long into her leaving him again, he'd been instructed what door belonged to Dr. Patterson. He let himself in.

Her office was petite. It had startled him, to say the least. He'd stopped in his tracks and gradually taken in what sat at the other end of office 323's white Oakwood door.

Chic and professional; two words that popped in his head but refused to slip through his lips. He bobbed his head and continued further into the room. Were all the offices this size? With the way she'd carried herself with enough aloofness, he'd anticipated an office overlooking Tillamook, an office that spoke of all

her sweat in the industry. In all sincerity, his initial description was a polite way of saying "monochrome.", "boring" As in it lacked color and architectural aesthetic. Not that he could do a better job... His office in Portland—cubicle as he'd only recently started as a financial advisor with *Larsson & Brown*—was only a little better than what she'd settled with. Then who was he to critique her taste?

Did he even once consider if she'd had a say in what her workplace resembled? No, this couldn't be him, he would move a motion for a better workroom, or he wouldn't provide his services to the company. Sincerely, the walls were a shade of grey that made him regret being called in there. The chairs, two armchairs placed opposite each other were wine red. If he didn't know any better, he would wonder whether she'd chosen the dungeon theme to contrast the pleasant foyer he'd walked through.

Her desk had only an iMac and a keyboard and a mouse. Nothing else sat atop it. No papers, nothing. It was clean, too clean.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Campbell?" She'd shut the door behind her and strolled to her desk, the sound of her heels clicking against the hardwood floors filled his ears. He was forced to confine himself in one of the wine chairs.

"How do you… know my name?"

"We have your presence on record, your appointment was this morning, but you never showed up." She sat pin straight in her seat enough so that he'd begun to doubt his own posture. Now he didn't have the best by a long shot, but he couldn't help straightening out after a stolen glance at her. "My floor assistant Bridget informed me that you don't have a *Plan* with us and, that could better prevent you from waiting in line."

Paul pretended to consider her offer. He didn't have a reason to have

an insurance plan with their private hospital. Not since he resided in Portland. When he didn’t answer immediately, she skipped over the topic and said instead; “According to Pierce, you just lost your mother, should we start there?”

He couldn't help but notice now perched in place the floral scent that trailed her was more alive in her office. He didn't know whether it put him at ease or spiked his already rattled nerves. He would have asked what brand of perfume she was wearing and why it felt like her office had been baptized with it. That was rude. He ought to keep thoughts and comments like that to himself.

He'd glanced over his shoulder at the white Oakwood door. "It's unlocked if you want to run." She hadn’t bothered a glance at him from where she’d been booting up her iMac.

Did he want to run? Run from what? The opportunity to open up

about his mother? Wasn't this for the best? But how much could he unload on Lisa that wouldn't cost him his entire wedding budget?

"I've been here twice, running isn't an option." He eased into his seat. The irony wasn't lost on him.

"Then why did you overlook my question?" He felt as if he were on the hot seat.

"You've asked a lot of questions—"

"No, I haven't. I asked one, and you are yet to answer." She typed away on her keyboard and he'd listened to the soft patter of her nails against the keyboard.

"Umm… you want to know about my mother." His mouth went dry.

"Mr. Campbell, I am a busy woman, who turned down my lunch break because Pierce is such a good friend of mine. So, if you would cut to the chase, I would really appreciate it."

He wasn't comfortable with her irritability. Weren't therapists meant to be patient?

"I don't know what you want to know about her, she was brutally murdered less than three-days ago, stabbed ten times around her chest and stomach and strangled to death in a wedding dress for some goddamn reason no one wants to explain to me."

For the first time since she'd joined him in her office, Lisa Patterson looked at him, and her eyes had been broadened.

CHAPTER THREE

Lisa Patterson was startled. He was the son of the woman in the threadbare wedding dress. She'd heard about the Campbell murder. Who in Tillamook hadn't? It had made the headline every day since it happened. The morning and the night news reports had special segments to discuss the gruesome details of the crime on 6358 Miller Avenue. Lisa hadn't been able to watch the news without that woman's picture coming up with reruns of reporters standing outside her home documenting their findings. It had become a permanent subject of conversation amongst her team.

Assistant Psychologist Stuart Middleton claimed it was a crime of passion, a wedding-night-gone-wrong, he believed the antique storekeeper had been killed by her newlywed husband, he'd heard it from the news report and couldn't stop theorizing in the breakroom just how common it was for a marital dispute to turn bloody.

Lisa didn't know what to believe.

Things had taken a darker turn and reporters had begun to fear this could have been a premeditated attack.

From what Lisa had heard, there were no leads and the Sherriff's department as well as the City Police Department were scrambling through witness reports, their suspect, a strong, lean male who's quick on his feet. Not nearly the age of the late Mrs. Campbell.

"And I can imagine you've had a hurricane of emotions to sort through,

can you tell me about them?" What hadn't he felt?

"Anger. Regret. I'm not even sad, I just, wish I could have been there. She was… so old and so… helpless." Lisa nodded. It wasn't uncommon for grief to morph into anger and regret. But that wasn't what she was looking for. She was listening, evaluating his mental stability, probing for self-destructive behaviors. Any indication that he was in need of her services.

"You're entitled to every feeling you have." She briefly returned her attention to her computer and documented his words.

"And if you were there, what would you have done?" She'd held his eyes; they were a blue-green that was more blue than green in the light. He shifted in his seat. He tinted. He dreaded that about his chapped skin. Women of color, people of color like Lisa Patterson didn't glow when they were embarrassed. If anything, they had the upper hand. They could

remain unreadable. Tasking everyone else to take a guess what they were feeling and maybe just if fate would have it, their speculations might be in the ballpark. He frowned.

"I… I…" He was at a loss for words. He'd never thought to put himself at the scene. What would he have done if he'd had the chance? What would he have done to change the outcome of his mother's case? Would he have killed a man in defense of his mother? The answer seemed easy enough, why then couldn't he explain that to her. If he had, the tables would have been turned and he would be the one sought after by the authorities. Because in all honesty, even if he'd done a noble thing and saved his mother, he would have to live with the burden of another man's blood on his hands. He would have to undergo a court process to prove that his actions had indeed been in the defense of his mother. "I don't know what I

would have done." He ran his hands through his hair, his legs thumping.

"And that's okay," He didn't seem convinced. "Mr. Campbell, I want you to hear me, and understand that, whatever outcome your mother faced, whether you would have been there to save her or not, is perfectly okay."

He shook his head but said nothing.

"It's okay," She said again.

"It's okay," He echoed. He'd been staring at the wall behind her, as if evading her amber eyes. They were downturned and flecked with devotion.

"And how is your sleep?" She steepled her hands. His responses were delayed as if he was purposely taking all the time in the world to deliberate. She didn't have all the time in the world. This was her only opportunity to sneak a turkey wrap sandwich. Her stomach whined at the thought. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip and drew it between her

teeth. Perhaps she wouldn't be so famished if she hadn't missed out on her breakfast.

She knew why she'd skipped out on it.

She had no one else to blame but herself.

"I don't." Paul said concentrating on the hole in her wall where it appeared a nail had been shoved. Why had she taken it out? What had been hung on it? A calendar? A clock? A picture frame? Oddly enough none of those features seemed to fit into her gothic décor.

"You don't what?" Her jaw clenched. She wasn't the best person to associate with on an empty stomach.

"I haven't been able to sleep since it happened…" He traced the outline of her rounded face with his finger on the tabletop. "The night I heard, I got on the first plane here with my fiancé, Claire… I live in Portland and I know the drive would have cost less and it

wasn't all that far, but I didn't think I had it in me to drive…" She had high cheekbones like most celebrities. Although hers were real. And with her soft chin and dainty nose, she stood out in her own way. "And I haven't even been able to confirm the body… The county morgue has been on my neck about it… and I know they can probably proceed with her investigation without me, but what type of son am I if I can't even go see her?" He was uneasy in his seat. That was normal. Most of her clients, her patients squirmed in their seats if they weren't thoughtlessly fiddling with the features she drew from her drawer for their entertainment.

"What was she like?" She asked. He let out a hard breath.

"What wasn't she like. She was my mother… she was…" Anyone else would have missed it, the anger that flashed across his blue-green eyes. But there was a reason she was the most recommended Counselling

Psychologist in Tillamook. She was observant. It was gone as quickly as it appeared. “I’m sure you’re expecting me to tell you some epistle about her loving she was in her own way, how she was willing to do anything to give me the life she thought I deserved…” Lisa Patterson was inclined to believe that he was deflecting. He was hiding something… He wasn’t going to answer her question. At least not in simple straight forward terms. And she had a strong inkling that whatever she sought; she wasn’t going to get it out of him that easily.

“And did you?” He tipped his head, his forehead puckered.

“Did I what, Doctor?” He sat up in his seat, her stomach whined again and she internally winced hoping for the sake of the progress they were making, that he didn’t hear it.

One thing she’d learned on the job as a psychologist was that her patents, nine-out of ten were easily spooked back into their shell. He was giving

her what she needed, what she could work with. And to her, that counted as progress.

“Did you deserve the life she gave you… or wanted to give you?” He shrugged.

“How should I know. I was a kid.” He barked; his voice bored. She nodded.

“And how was it, being a kid with a mother like Blake Campbell?” He gripped the arm of the chair.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He jutted forward; a hand jabbed in her face. “I hope for the sake of your career with this establishment you’re not disrespecting my mother?”

She stiffened. “Mr. Campbell may I remind you, this session is off record. I have said it before and I would say it again, it is cutting into my lunch hour. Your threats are out of line, and I would beg you to take your time and understand my words. You’re just hearing them and we can’t move forward if you don’t choose to

listen." He returned to his seat. She relaxed. "Do you think you can answer my question?" He nodded.

A silence perched in between them. It wasn't a no. She waited. Watching, listening.

"It was difficult. Especially because of that damned portrait. It made my life a living hell."

Lisa Patterson couldn't stop thinking about Paul Campbell. About his case. Twenty-five percent of witnesses to murders or other heinous crimes were plagued with post-traumatic-stress-disorder. The patients often undergoing episodes of helplessness, fear and a lack of expressive ability.

"Can you tell me a little bit more about this… portrait?" She glimpsed at her Breitling watch, her legs tapping beneath her table. From the waist up, she seemed put together, collected.

She'd maintained eye contact with her new client and listened, her other

hand pressed against the surface of her polished desk. For the sake of their session, she'd scattered her organized worksurface with documents, and booklets. On her computer, she had opened a file for Mr. Campbell. Not to his knowledge, and not that he would find out, but she was unable to create a record of him on the Wellness Center's database. She hadn't intended to in the first place. She'd taken him as her private client. Her secret that the board of directors at the top of Wellness Center need not find out about.

Evening had come like a barreling truck slamming into Tillamook and she was anything but pleased with having to part ways with Mr. Campbell. He was unlike any of her other clients. He promised a surge of adrenaline with his case. It wasn't everyday she got the son of a murder victim in her office. Often times they were troubled teenagers, youths who'd found themselves in the wrong

arms and were undergoing unnecessary treatment.

Her clients were people the hospitals and psychiatry departments had failed. They were young women and men who'd shared a similar experience to hers…

It was only their first session. She would pen him down for another. He wouldn't need to compensate her. His cooperation with her would be enough.

"She believed he… it… was alive." He chuckled to himself at the error he'd made. "It's been years of her correcting me, I even forgot I could stop referring to it as he." Lisa sat up in her seat. Things just got a little more interesting… His mother had displayed signs of schizophrenia? Her lashes fluttered.

"And I gather this was a picture of your father?" He nodded. She'd heard the stories. Seen the articles on Tillamook Times, an ageless newspaper native to the small town.

“She would bring it dinner, take it to the living room to join her as she watched State of Tillamook, that was her favorite news program and she refused to watch anything else.” She knew her phone’s recorder was capturing his words and even still she’d penned down the news program mentally noting the research she would do into it at her own time.

“It was her favorite because he liked it?” It wasn’t absurd for schizophrenics to like what their mental manifestations liked as well.

“Not at all. That one was all her.” Her shoulders fell.

“And this continued even in her last days?” He exhaled a deep long breath.

“I wasn’t with her, Patterson. Last I saw, the both of them were with us at Christmas Dinner.”

The phone on her desk blared. She knew who was calling. Julie from the front desk needing to take her leave and carpool with Lisa. Her time with

Mr. Campbell was up. Her stomach knotted, but this time it wasn't out of hunger.

Her eyes fluttered shut, she counted to three and pried them open, reaching for the still blaring office phone. She took it off the receiver. "Patterson's office, Lisa Patterson speaking?"

"I'm all packed up, where did you park anyway? I'm about to leave my desk," Julie's voice filled her ears and she winced. She wasn't ready to leave. She didn't have a say in the matter.

"I'll be down in about five… I am still… working on something." She glanced at Mr. Campbell who'd reached for his own phone. She returned her eyes to the white Oakwood door that kept in the son of a murder victim.

"Well hurry, you know I have to get back to Tyler unless he's going to ask more questions than I can handle." She knew about her

neighbor's hyper curious husband. Tyler Huggins. Lisa was still yet to consider the benefit of settling down in a one-sided marriage with men like that, the men that overpopulated and roamed the streets. Men fueled by jealousy and droplets of concern for the strain his wife endured during the workday. Lisa had met Tyler, he wasn't friendly. According to Julie, he was nicer to her, but Lisa doubted it.

Lisa was unmarried. Sure, the idea had crossed her mind once or twice, but her career had proposed and she'd said yes. She was loyal to the Tillamook Wellness Center despite the ups and downs. She was willing to stick by it through thick and through thin.

"Sure." She pressed the phone back where she'd picked it.

In her youth, back when she was at the ripe age of twenty-five, she'd been proposed to, planned everything down to the bachelorette party when she was going to get shit-faced with

her friends... She never made it to that night.

She cleared her throat and forced on her lips a paper smile that didn't meet her tired eyes. "Well, Mr. Campbell I guess that unfortunately brings us to the end of our session for the week," She flipped through her desktop schedule trying to fit him in. There was little to no wiggle room to slot in another session with him unless a client were to cancel and she didn't see that happening. She deliberated a home session, but didn't want to come off as strange. The best she could offer would be her lunch yet again—It wasn't as if starving herself was a new phenomenon if her youth had taught her anything. However, unlike this session, he would only be allowed an hour. It was better than nothing. She'd added him for the same day the following week.

"I hope that's fine with you Mr. Campbell?"

“As long as I don’t have to wait in line like I did this morning?” She barked a laugh. It was a nervous impulse.

“Not at all, I have you squeezed in, so just walk up to my office and we will get started,”

He rolled his shoulders. “And how much is this going to cost me? This session and the one for next week.”

“It’s on me.”

He’d pinned her down with a skeptical look in those blue-green eyes.

“Business must be great considering you can give away free sessions,”

Business was tough, she barely had any time for herself… not that it was any of his concern. “Business is fine.”

He’d been on his way not too long after that.

She’d lingered taking her time to pack up and organize her workspace.

She wasn't looking forward to the coming day. She would have to tolerate the alcoholics that had booked her a week ahead. Not that she didn't like her patients… she didn't hate them, their attitudes, she could live without.

Nichole who was her 9:00 A.M. for the following morning had been dependent on the bitter-sweet pleasure of a drink for seven-years. Admitted into a rehabilitation Center on 3rd Street, the woman was placed on anti-psychotics for three years. She endured episodes resulting from the unwarranted drug use and the psychiatrists at the center had refused to offer her a listening ear and that's where Lisa Patterson came into the mix.

Having walked down a similar path, Lisa found it encouraging to not only share her story of missing her own wedding after checking herself into an asylum at twenty-five and tolerating day after day of unjustified

medications and the trauma it trudged with it.

With her black Calvin Klein bag stuffed, Lisa shut off her lights and sauntered out the door. At twenty-five, she liked to think her biggest mistake would have been imprisoning herself in a marriage with a man she didn't love.

She jogged down the stairs. Five-years later and she couldn't rid her mind of the sleepless nights, the crippling anxiety, the fear that one day she wouldn't wake up, she would have lost the battle against the shackles of the medication she was given.

Out the door she approached the rear parking where she'd stashed away her grey Hyundai Elantra Eco. The lot was empty of every other car. That would explain how Julie had found her way to the car and had leaned against the trunk, her phone in hand. At the beep from Lisa's keys, the lights of the car winked, and the

doors unlocked. Julie let herself into the passenger seat even before Lisa could make it all the way.

She couldn't just stop the medications… that was the tricky part about anti-psychotics. They had a timeline. They couldn't be stopped unless they'd reached the six-month mark. In her case, the year and half mark. And stopping it, pouring her time into a psychology degree, she'd battled with guilt… she had brought it on herself… shame, she wouldn't have turned herself in if she weren't having an affair with her college roommate, Madeline.

The night sky was sugar on black marble. And beneath it, Lisa Patterson was in her own head reminiscing a woman that ought not be dug from the recess of her memories. Though she couldn't help the smile that ghosted across her lips. Madeline had showed her that what she was doing with William Marshal, getting married wasn't what she wanted. She was

using it as a cover. It was the ageless tale of a gripping petrification of her sexuality. In a town as small as Tillamook she didn't need people carrying it around that she was gay… bi- or at the time, confused. To her, that was a big decision and she feared coming out and regretting it, going back on it and living with the humiliation of coming out in the first place.

She pulled the driver door open and settled in, her bag flung to the back seat.

"You look happy," Julie acknowledged. She'd already buckled in.

Was she happy? Thinking about Madeline had left her feeling lighter despite her day. It was quite unfortunate things hadn't worked out.

"Do I?" She reached for her seatbelt drawing it until she heard the click.

What could have really happened to that man's mother? The thought

was fleeting. News articles argued over a crime of passion—Stuart Middleton's perspective—and a premeditated killer. What side was she on?

One session wasn't going to answer that question for her. Further research once she'd separated from Julie might bring her closer to the answer she sought, but even still, she doubted it would be enough.

"I saw that guy from earlier leaving, were you with him all this time? Is that why you were held up?" Her grip on the steering wheel tightened. She clicked the car awake and listened to its soft hum as it stirred.

"You can't tell the board Julie. His case is technically off record."

"Look who's breaking the rules now, goody-two-shoes-Lisa Patterson," Julie teased. "I'm proud, I guess I'm finally rubbing off on you," Lisa resisted the urge to shake her head and rather pulled out of her spot,

out of the lot and into traffic towards 3508 on 8th Street.

"How did he react to being off record?" Julie wanted to know.

Lisa had nibbled on her bottom lip and kept her attention on switching lanes at 5th Street towards 6th by Sacred Heart Church. Night drives after a long-fatigued day at the Wellness Center were her least favorite. She couldn't particularly claim to work far enough from home to complain. The commute was reasonable. Her workhours even without the special guest she'd had, was anything but. And the pay, it was decent, a quarter of which went into her upkeep. With another quarter going into rent that she independently shouldered, and whatever she had left going into savings, it was barely enough. She didn't like it, but for many years she'd been pocketing little bills that came her way from her clients. It was one of many secrets she'd had locked away.

"Don't tell me he doesn't know?" She didn't know what to tell her neighbor.

"I implied it!" She rose to her own defense. However, taking into consideration the kind of man Paul was, she doubted he had listened. She was growing tired of listening to her neighbor on this conversation. She knew how much trouble she could be in if he were to uncover that he was having sessions off record. Best case scenario she would lose her practicing license. Worst case she could be looking at compensating him from funds she doesn't have and or serving time.

"Well, I could talk to my sister, you remember her? Regan, she's been busy with work lately, but she can draw you up a contract to keep you from facing legal charges and to keep him from running to the board!"

Lisa Patterson's eyes flashed with confusion. "Wouldn't she run to the

board herself and tell them what I'm doing?"

"Aren't you listening, she's busy with work and what does she have to gain if you go to jail or not? This is just a way of protecting yourself. And besides, she did the same for me when I got the job…" Julie had rambled on and on about how her sister could draw up indestructible contracts, but Lisa couldn't concentrate. She'd been unable to draw her mind from the possibility that Mr. Campbell could have killed his mother.

He'd barely met anyone at the Sherriff's department when he'd bolted through the translucent doors. He'd been addressed by a Gertrude Green who from the looks of things had been packing up as well. Many of the halls beyond the reception were rendered dark, barely any noise approaching.

"I know I'm late," He leaned against the marble desk pausing to catch his breath. "but I was wondering if the county morgue would still be in operation?" He had made the trip to the morgue adjacent to the main building. The opaque doors had been locked. And he'd banged and banged and rapped against it for dear life, almost expecting his mother to open up and bear and ear to his half-thought-out apology. She was stubborn, he'd told himself as he'd leaned against the no doubt filth painted glass, one tear after another rolling down his cheek. He huffed at the idea of crying as he pressed his back to the door and lowered himself to the ground. A man that on sight rained fear on many, a glare from him, sent a chill down the spine of onlookers was helpless and in tears at the door of the county morgue.

He hadn't cared who'd listened in.

He hadn't cared if this wasn't normal behavior.

He'd felt a release, a tingle in every part of him that brought a macabre grin onto his lips and he'd continued, speaking to his mother beyond the glass doors as if she would answer.

"I'd liked to say I should have been there. Since it happened, that's all I could think about. Being there to protect you like I promised I would."

Silence. It was in shambles when he released a dry laugh, one that soon turned to a cough.

"I would have beaten the hell out of whoever did this. I would have killed him."

He returned to the scene, a faceless man chasing his mother up the grand stairway that was almost an accent to the foyer. Her old lean legs burning as they pushed her further and further away from her assailant, until they couldn't. Not anymore and they'd given way on the mattress of the master bedroom. The presumably dust covered unused sheets.

"I would have killed him." He whispered.

Silence.

"And I would have run, like he did." He'd squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.

"I… I wouldn't have been able to do anything," He resolved hesitantly. "And I hope for your sake, you're in a better place. And you've long forgotten what you had to endure to get there."

When she hadn't for the longest time, he'd picked himself up and darted towards the main building. Towards the front desk.

He hadn't been there when it had happened.

And even after when his wife had requested, he claim his mother's body, he'd dragged his legs.

"Looking for Finn?" Gertrude Green asked.

"Finn?"

"Yeah, Finn, our medical examiner or coroner but he gets very

antsy when people call him that. He's the one responsible for the bodies. He works with pathologists from Tillamook General Hospital on 4th Street, laboratory experts from Aventist and an autopsy expert from the City Police Department."

"Yes, I guess I'm looking for him." Gertrude Green shook her head of salt hair and continued to shove things into her bag.

"He clocked out about an hour ago. Said something about heading to a bar, American Angels? My son used to frequent there when they first opened. It was closer to our home than it is here, so I wonder why our M.E. would drive across town for a bar?" Paul couldn't answer that, but he was more than thankful that the sweet-old-lady couldn't keep her trap shut.

He'd thanked her and set off into the street once again.

He didn't know how he was going to convince the coroner to let him

have his mother's body, but he was hoping a few beers and a light conversation ought to do the trick.

Annabelle Dawson had barely been able to contain her excitement turning into work the following morning. Treating herself to a hazelnut latte—her favorite—she'd sauntered through the studio doors, chest puffed in her best pair of Jimmy Choo ankle strapped heels.

She'd slept like log and risen to the best text in her career yet. Simon Neil had reached out to her. It worked. Her plan to take several steps backwards and peer through the eyes of the dead woman worked. The studio directors had gobbled up the concept and were airing it that morning. Sure, their ratings hadn't gone through the roof, hadn't even moved but she had high hopes for her segment.

It wasn't breaking news like Lucy Wilkens had, but it was news the people of Tillamook would want to hear.

The fact that the board had approved the title for the segment was the icing on the cake. *Before the Body*, on Channel Six. The thought gave a cheeky Annabelle Dawson butterflies in the pit of her stomach. The documentary would be a collection of interviews told through the perspective of the people of Tillamook who'd encountered the victim. Beginning from the days after Blake Campbell's late husband's passing to her very own death, Annabelle was determined to paint Blake in a brighter light than the one Lucy Wilkens shun on her.

"You look happy," Frank leaned against her cubicle wall. She sat at her metal table and placed her Hermès purse on top of it. She couldn't contain her smile.

He took a bite of his scone, crumbs raining onto her floor. Even that didn't bother her.

"You haven't heard?" She could have sworn Simon Neil would have blabbed about the segment already? He was never really one to keep things to himself, if the unemployment rumors were any indication. That day had been carved at the back of her mind. She'd barely made it back from his office when the questions begun to pelt her.

"They're airing our documentary on Blake Campbell this morning!" His eyes bulged.

He coughed. Once, twice… she frowned, that hadn't been the reaction she'd been expecting.

His coughs were strained. She rummaged through her bag and pulled out a bottle of water. She didn't know how to do those stomach-compression-things to get people to stop choking. With her heart suspended in place, she leaped from

her seat and placed the bottle against his lips forcing him to drink it.

His coughing subsided, her released a breath.

“I’m sorry, I tried to cut down on my carbs with a scone and… bottom line, carbs don’t try to kill you, stick with carbs.” He straightened and finished the rest of her water. “Really, Neil liked your pitch?” She nodded. “So, we’re not getting fired?”

She cringed. She couldn’t say. “… I wouldn’t go that far, but we have a chance to keep our jobs!” She did a little dance in her swiveling chair.

“Alright!” He tossed the scone and the empty bottle of water in the bin and dusted his hands on his pants. “What do we have to do next boss?”

“We need more interviews and I have a pretty good idea who we should get in contact with,” She reached for the phone on her desk.

The woman answered on the third ring. “Campbell’s Antiques,

Katherine speaking?" Annabelle's eyes glistened.

Katherine Tapper was the current storekeeper for Campbell's Antiques. Having been employed as an intern at nineteen at the time Blake Campbell owned and controlled the business, she was the ideal person Annabelle needed to speak with for her next interview.

"Good morning, Miss. Tapper, I'm Annabelle Dawson, a reporter for Channel Six News, and we're interested in featuring you in our latest documentary," Frank leaned against Annabelle's cheek, hoping to catch even just a fraction of what the woman on the other end of the line had to say. "If you're available, my team would like to speak to you about the deceased Blake Campbell?"

Annabelle fell silent for the longest time and straightening, Frank nibbled on his nails, trying not to read into his friend's creased eyebrows.

Annabelle returned the receiver to its rightful place and her smile returned. “Get Amanda in on this, we, are going to Campbell’s Antiques!”

She had another interview! She couldn’t wait to see the look on Simon Neil’s face when she slammed the pitch for the next episode of *Before the Body* on his table.

Despite what she’d anticipated, the store on 6th by Ivy Avenue, wasn’t a deserted crumbling mess… However, Amanda had her own opinion on the place.

“I can’t believe I let you drag me to another substandard place. I mean Blake Campbell lived in this town; I’m sure we could have spoken to someone at Safeway and still gotten the same result.” Amanda didn’t bother to bottle up her disdain. She’d scrunched up her face as she walked across the parking lot. “At least there I could have picked up some groceries

for my kids." She pushed through the clear glass doors.

Katherine hadn't been behind the swollen front desk.

Frank who'd logged a suitcase full of foldable equipment begun to set up by the windows where the lighting would suit their shots.

Amanda had vanished through the racks of collectables.

"Miss. Tapper?" Annabelle called out, taking tentative steps into the store. This was Blake Campbell's store.

It was sickening what had happened to the poor woman. In her own home. The details were horrendous. Chased up the stairs, and killed in the same room her husband's body had been uncovered.

Chase had to do something about it, he had to catch whoever had done this, he had to make sure the sick bastard paid for it for the rest of his life.

She couldn't imagine if something like that had happened to their mother… A chill ran down her spine.

"You must be, Annabelle Dawson." A woman in a bright green sundress strode through a white door marked staff-only.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss. Tapper. As we discussed on the phone, we would like to speak to you about your deceased colleague—"

"Boss." Annabelle nodded with a tight smile.

"Boss, Blake Campbell."

"Sure!" Annabelle guided her to the chairs Frank had arranged by the windows. Amanda was already seated, a small mirror in her palm. "Blake was a wonderful woman and I can't believe someone would do that to her."

"Beautiful, but let's save it for when the cameras are rolling," Amanda snapped the mirror shut and shoved it into her bag.

"And who are you?" Katherine tilted her head.

"I'm Amanda Hampton, News Anchor for Channel Six," She smacked her lips and stared at the camera waiting for her que.

Annabelle bit down on her lower lip, but occupied the chair Frank had set out for her next to Amanda. The chairs were positioned in such a way both the News Anchor and Reporter were facing Katherine Tapper.

"Ready when you are," Frank called. Running her fingers through her air once more, Amanda gave him the cue and threw her first question to Katherine Tapper.

Business had hit a drywall since the passing of Christopher Campbell. He'd been dead for a month. Thirty days. That was a long time for a woman's husband to be buried, and yet, it was becoming increasingly clear he'd had a hands-on roll to play

in the business she thought she was running on her own.

She'd played herself. Conned herself into believing she, with only a high-school degree could run a business. Pathetic.

How hadn't she read the fine print? He'd surprised her with a business, the store had already been registered and everything!

At the time, she'd been convinced he'd created it for her.

He was dead and she could tell this was a business he was manipulating to drive sales.

The problem? He hadn't bothered to mention what he was doing to drive sales and she was blank.

She didn't know what to do or who to call for help.

What had begun with less than a handful of dissatisfied customers had mutated into a drastic reduction in her daily client in flow.

Two counterfeit products and an outburst by her teenage son and she

was out of business? Blake Campbell nibbled on her bottom lip. This couldn't have anything to do with her business being associated with a dead-man… could it?

If anything, Christopher Campbell's passing should have attracted sympathy clients.

It wasn't a secret she wasn't too welcome in her home town. She'd heard the rumors, people hated her decision to drop out of school, to marry a man that could have been her father. In the eyes of the locals, she was a skank. She had a feeling that had a part to play in her dry store.

Day-in and day-out, she'd sent Paul to school and returned to her day job and sat behind a swollen polished mahogany desk in a once clustered antique store. But she hadn't been alone.

If there was anyone who still had faith in her and in Campbell's Antiques… it wasn't her friends, it was Katherine Tapper.

She had opted to intern at Campbell's Antiques. She was the daughter of Christopher Campbell's ex-wife after their sloppy divorce.

A good person at heart, Blake hadn't been able to turn the teenage girl away. What was she going to do tell her to seek employment elsewhere? There were only a handful of places taking in interns.

It wasn't as if there was much to do at Campbell's Antiques, the business practically ran itself… in the beginning that is.

Aside from restocking the shelves and polishing the marble countertops and display surfaces, there wasn't much to do.

And with sales on park, there wasn't any need to restock since nothing had been sold.

Starting a business hadn't been her idea on the onset. She'd been content playing the role of a housewife, the role her mother, Mary

Slaughter had reminded her time and time again that best suited her.

"You're supposed to please a man, not compete with him," She'd been told growing up and… she was good at pleasing men… not that she'd confided in her mother that she'd gotten a head start on the activities of a wife beforehand.

The boys at her school loved her cooking, and adored her… extracurricular skills. And she longed for the praise.

She wasn't business smart; she didn't even go to college. She didn't know numbers as well as her friends Faith Thompson and Patricia Hartley. They were great at it! She'd always envied them, she knew she was getting duped at those overpriced restaurants, and they'd protected her from it, they'd always handled the numbers and bills, she just handed the money over to them.

Faith was more street smart; they'd met in Twelfth grade

Chemistry class. Patricia was all numbers and had helped Blake out with her math homework until graduation.

Though both girls had gone off to college, and Blake had met and married Christopher Campbell, they'd kept in touch and managed to be there when she needed them the most.

A time she couldn't forget had to be the day phones were normalized. Christopher had gone into a fit, he hadn't been comfortable with his wife owning one.

"You think I'll call other men is that it?" She'd spat in his scrunched-up face. To her, he'd always looked like an angry cat, the animated effect was only enhanced by his chunky size. He was nowhere near overweight. He wasn't underweight either. He was somewhere in the middle, with a huggable 'dad-body'. He hadn't dignified her outburst with an answer. And when she'd relayed this to Faith and Patricia over lunch

the following afternoon, they'd been agitated with him.

"Surely, he can't be convinced you'll be disloyal, I mean he spoils you way too much," Faith had said, pushing her scrambled eggs around her plate with a fork. Was that all they saw? The money he spent on her?

She shook her head.

They'd perched by the window-seats of a café on 6th, Mocha on the Rocks. It was closest to Faith's home a couple blocks down. The afternoon sun had spilled through the thin glass and onto their table. "It's not just that," Blake rose to her husband's defense. Sure, the money was an added advantage, but he wasn't just money. He was…corny jokes, warm hugs and advice she never got growing up.

She wasn't going to tell them the pitiful story of how she'd been raised by a single mother, or how she'd been pushed on this path to prevent making the same mistakes Mary Slaughter

had. She didn't think they would care too much for it.

"Then what?" Patricia looked up from her own phone. Of course, the both of them had gotten a pair, they always seemed to get the latest anything once it came out. There was a time a new dress was released by Prada and both girls had argued over who would get it.

"He knows about the glances we get when we're out and," Blake leaned in, as if there were people listening. No one was listening. The café was almost empty, not many people could afford the items on the menu. "He hasn't said anything but I know he's worried I'll leave him for someone younger."

"Will you?" Faith had asked.

Even after Christopher's passing, even as she sat beneath the florescent lights of her very own store, Katherine reorganizing the new arrivals, she didn't have an answer to her friend's question. Would she have

left Christopher Campbell for a younger man?

She flipped the page of the magazine between her dainty fingers. She couldn't seem to concentrate on the hungry leggy models in skimpy clothing.

Katherine had read the stories, Christopher's opinion on the articles bubbling to the surface, he hadn't sat at bay and let the media shred his wife to pieces. He'd taken to the papers confessing that he hadn't married her for her cooking or her body, though he'd sang praises in her name for both, he'd been convinced she was more than her works in the kitchen and bedroom. She was smart and even if she couldn't see it, he saw it for her. And so, in an interview with Tillamook Daily Champion, he'd confessed introducing her to Campbell's Antiques.

And business had been booming in the years leading onto his passing. Business was yet to take the plunge

when Katherine had been hired as an intern at Campbell's Antiques.

In another article released the following week, it was headlined; Blake Campbell Empowered and interviewed the controversial twenty-seven-year-old wife who'd with time grown to love their dynamic. The mornings were 'emboldening', she'd told Tillamook Daily, she would brew his morning cup of joe and prepare Christopher for his day at Campbell's House of Timber. Once he was gone, she would get Paul ready for school and get dressed for her day at Campbell's Antiques.

Those days, she'd admitted, she'd felt empowered as a woman. She'd felt as though there was more to life than sitting at home and reading parenting books on how to properly raise Paul. He was a good enough boy; he didn't need her to shadow him and live her life around him.

In a matter of weeks, in a pursuing article by Tillamook Times, Blake

Campbell had been named Tillamook's most influential business woman. A title many disputed. She had a husband that brought the world to her feet, a job that many envied and the perfect son.

Blake heaved a sigh, her shoulder's falling.

Katherine hadn't noticed it before, but she'd been staring at her boss. She returned to the restroom. Blake had left her on bathroom duty. Even though no one had been in their store for days, Blake had insisted the bathrooms smell like fresh-picked lilacs.

She hadn't done all she could with the bathrooms. She could use to get out of Blake Campbell's hair.

With only a high-school degree, Katherine mused leaning against the porcelain sink. Blake had become yet again more popular than her peers that had mocked her for not wanting to seek a higher education.

Blake wasn't a dreamer, a high achiever, she was Blake Campbell and the woman always seemed to be content with that.

The days after Christopher's passing… weren't so lucrative.

Why weren't there people in the store? In Katherine's opinion, Blake had designed the place well enough, the walls, a welcoming shade of egg white, the floors, a corresponding shade of marble. Metal shelves lined the entrance and display tables had been erected to showcase her most expensive products. To Katherine, the place looked chic!

She could recall in the beginning, it was the place, for pictures and quality antiques, now it was that place, and from what it seemed people had been there and done that… If that was the case, she would have to find the next 'it' place to work.

She needed the money. She couldn't be loyal to a company that didn't have a future.

A bell chimed; they had a customer! Her heart caught in her throat and Katherine had darted to the bathroom door and cracked it open, her gaze on the man by the door, the familiar man by the door, her shoulder's fell, disappointment and fear cloaked her in a coat.

"Still as beautiful as ever, Princess," Richard Dean had said letting himself into the store with all the confidence in the world. Not only was he a handsome young man, but he'd managed to make a name for himself in half the time Christopher had. Katherine knew of Richard Dean. He was trouble, and he was in their store.

Blake however was determined to see the better half of the man Tillamook dreaded.

"Wait, wait, if he was trouble, what was he doing in your store?" Amanda Hampton interjected. She'd

been sitting pin-straight, staring at both Katherine Tapper and Frank's camera lens. The woman had done a magnificent job at painting a vivid picture for their story. And Annabelle had struggled with every bone in her body not to display her pearly whites. The tone of their interview was glum even if she knew this was going to save her job.

She'd asked her questions, but Amanda had stolen the spotlight… As always.

She couldn't wait to get this story to Simon Neil, who hadn't pulled her out of probation. Her job was still on the line until she could find a way to get those ratings to skyrocket. He was yet to get back to her on what the studio had aired.

It was hard, not reaching for her phone, but she'd kept her eyes on Katherine Tapper and cowered beneath Amanda's shadow letting the News Anchor do her thing in front of the camera.

"We're getting to that," Katherine said, leaning back in the armchair by the window. "In any case…"

"Don't call me that," Blake had said. She returned to the magazines she'd already flipped through.

Richard had been in awe of the modern spacious décor enhanced by the ancient products she had on display. She loved her late husband, but one of the things that had drawn her to him had been his success. Not the money, but the fact that he'd pulled his life together.

"I will call you that, because, it suits you." He joined her by the front desk.

"Whatever,"

"Slow day?" He glanced over his shoulder, the room was crisp, a silence running through it.

"Slow week," She shrugged. "I'm not good at this business thing, but I

have to make it work, Paul needs to go to school, he needs to eat… it's a lot,"

She couldn't say she'd been prepared for the whole parenting thing. She'd expected it, she was married and couldn't avoid it forever. her mother Mary had anticipated it too… the needy woman always nagged a twenty-one-year-old Blake for grandchildren, at the time Blake hadn't been thinking of having kids, she'd yearned to relish in the married life and all it promised. and when Blake had taken in, she hadn't been ready.

Getting pregnant and posing for maternity shoots was one thing, but raising another human being was another.

"I can imagine,"

"I doubt it," She flipped through a pair of pumps the old Blake Campbell would have run to Christopher to buy for her. She couldn't do that anymore.

Buy things at will…

Or run to Christopher Campbell.

He was gone and she needed to make peace with that.

"Well, my mother is hosting a charity banquet and I need a… date, a plus one and I usually hate these things but you could make some connections to get business off the ground." He babbled looking around. She nearly chuckled at the way his cheeks had flushed.

"That counts as marketing, right?" She rose to her feet.

"Yes, it counts as marketing, my mom works with a lot of influential people… people like Christopher," She'd deliberated his words. People like Christopher meant people that could keep Campbell's Antiques afloat. She would do whatever it took. She had a son to look after, she couldn't afford to be picky. "So, you in?"

She smiled and nodded, "count me in!"

“And do you have any idea where we can find this man?” Annabelle Dawson leaned forward in her seat.

Katherine shook her head solemnly. “He’s dead.”

Annabelle’s head snapped in Frank’s direction. The cameras were still rolling.

She was sure as hell going to keep her job.

It was farfetched. The concept of Paul Campbell masterminding the murder of his mother. Especially since he’d sought her guidance.

But ever since the idea had flapped across her mind, she hadn’t been able to shake it off. It was there when she’d dropped Julie off and returned to her two-bedroom. He had

the opportunity. He knew the house better then anyone. As water cascaded down her chunky generous body—She wasn't fat by a long shot, even if Nora liked to teaser that she was piling on the pounds. She was generously sized with a waist that many desired and a chest she was proud of—during her after-work shower, she'd entertained a mental image of Paul jabbing a kitchen knife through his mother's chest.

Preparing her late dinner of Couscous hadn't been any better. She'd been conflicted. A part of her saw the Paul she'd spoken to as a patient. The burdened man, the broken son. And another part, saw a killer creating an alibi.

Fueled by this, she'd shoved her plates in the dishwasher and dove head first into a study on schizophrenia and how it affected children raised around it. She looked into the Campbell family, lulled by

Paul's voice replaying from her phone's recorder.

She'd read on a study conducted on forty-five participants raised by healthy caretakers and schizophrenic ones. The results were uneven where the impact of the mental illness was less than she would have anticipated. But even still, the numbers weren't zero and for that reason, she knew there was a chance Blake Campbell's upbringing could have had a part to play in Paul Campbell's behavior.

If indeed he was behind the heinous end Blake Campbell met, Lisa would peg it as a disgruntled son seeking retaliation for his rather unusual training.

He had after all demonstrated his disdain at her office.

Her phone shrieked. She reached for it.

When Julie had said she would talk to her sister Regan, one, Lisa had forgotten who her sister was and two,

Lisa hadn't been anticipating a call to her line in the dead of the night.

She hadn't been sleepy. Not in the slightest. Not with what she'd conversed with Paul Campbell still lurching about in her head. In all honesty, she hadn't attempted to place her head on the pillow. She was sure sleep would deny a visit to her.

Though sleep hadn't had her on its roster, she couldn't deny she was dead tired.

She'd been at the kitchen table, her laptop the only other light in the room aside the overhead dining light. Her home much like her office was in pristine condition. It was easy to maintain, everything she took out she put back and everything she made use of she cleaned. And for what it was worth, it wasn't a big home.

It had everything she needed, however, a living room, two petite bathrooms, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. Whenever her mother Nora Patterson would visit, the guest

bedroom was hers. Although it didn't have the tacky picture frames Nora carried around to spice up the bland room, it was still decorated to Lisa Patterson's satisfaction. White walls against dark wooden floorboards, an arm chair had been perched by the door, a grey-knit blanket thrown over the headrest, a yellow and white striped throw pillow leaned against the left arm. The bed was king sized, the end tables had been on sale, half off.

The dining room was between the kitchen and living room, a single table she'd gotten off Target and two chairs. She'd done much of the renovation of the home on her own with color palettes she'd found off the internet and wallpapers and paints she'd got on a sale on Amazon.

Lisa had been in a relative silence, soothed by a low burning lavender candle, putting together her conversation with Mr. Campbell. Pulling simultaneously, research for a

motive. If Mr. Campbell's mother had forced him to live with their 'father' long after his passing, Paul Campbell couldn't have been too pleased with her. She could imagine having to grow up with a schizophrenic mother. It ought to have taken a toll on him and in a rouse to rid himself of that life he'd snapped, offed her after Christmas, returned to Portland, the drive wouldn't be too long as he'd claimed, at best an hour, an hour and half with traffic.

She wasn't satisfied.

She had a theory; she didn't have concrete evidence.

Until she did, no one would need to know what she had cooking up.

Her phone continued to blare against her hand and Lisa Patterson swiped the screen. "Hello?" She called to the unknown and unregistered number.

"It's Regan, longtime no see, how are you?" Regan was polite. Lisa sat

up in her seat, unhooked her legs from the chair legs.

"I'm great and you?"

"Doing my best with what's been tossed in my direction. I have to file charges against whoever did this to the poor late Campbell woman and I don't even know who this killer could be." Color drained from her face.

"Umm… why do you have to do it?"

Regan chuckled.

"The office of the D.A. was very strict about its terms and conditions when they hired me." Lisa Patterson's eyes widened. Julie- Huggins-Sinclair. Regan Sinclair. How couldn't she have drawn the conclusion? The District Attorney of Tillamook was aware of her intercessions. Her stomach rumbled.

"Now Julie didn't tell me much, but she said I would have to meet with you to discuss the details and I was wondering if you could come down to my office mid-day tomorrow.

We can have a quick chat before you can get on your way, you must be a busy woman and I wouldn't want to keep you too long."

Lisa was beginning to rethink her decision.

Paul Campbell knew American Angels. He knew the only branch in the small town, He'd only been there a handful of times. One of which had been when he'd tasted beer for the first time with a counterfeit license. He'd been seventeen and it had been on a dare. He hadn't gotten caught the first time. But when he'd found himself returning there day after day with a band of rather unpleasant seventeen-year-olds, he'd just as easily been picked out and trudged to the City P.D. for underaged drinking and possession of a counterfeit license. He couldn't rid his mind of the shrill panic that had embraced him in a taut grip.

That was just one of the times American Angels had sent him to the police station facing charges. The other he could remember was after a long night of downing drink after drink, he'd been stopped not too far on the drive from the bar and accosted for DUI. Fear had abandoned him.

The bar had changed little since he'd been gone. It was dark, save for the lights over the bar and individual chairs and booths. Business was slow when he'd pushed through the doors. The number of customers were countable. In the middle of the room, still stood a pool table, one he'd gotten his first kiss against. He was yet to tell Claire that story. It had been with Samantha Baker, quite a looker. She'd had sparkling eyes, a sunny blue, skin of milk that he'd run his hands over as his lips claimed hers. They'd been leaned against the pool table, she'd been pressed against him, his hands firm on her waist as he

stabled himself against the game table that had been mounted to the ground.

He had no idea what happened to Samantha Baker and the table, it was in use by a line of men. Three of which had been waiting for their cue, and one of which had been leaned against the table, his eyes fixed on the white ball.

And then it hit him.

Not the pool ball.

But a bitter realization.

He didn't know who he was looking for.

On the road to the small neighborhood bar, he'd rehearsed what he would say to the coroner. He hadn't put a face on him, but he'd had a name.

The crowd was little. A family sat in the far end by the window, two girls sat up front in the table for two, and by the bar was a man with a newspaper and thick rimmed glasses and a cup of what Paul assumed to be

coffee, and a woman still adorned in her workday get up.

He didn't know what had gotten into him. But he hadn't fought it.

"AYEE!" He screamed at the top of his lungs. Heads snapped in his direction and he ignored the lurching feeling in his chest and the chiming voice at the back of his mind telling him to stop and leave. He would get a chance to speak to the coroner when work hours resumed in the morning. The problem? He couldn't wait till morning. "I'M LOOKING FOR A FINN, MEDICAL EXAMINER AT THE SHERRIFF'S DEPARTMENT!"

Roars and cheers filled the air. His skin prickled.

"Are we going to see a fight?" A woman asked.

"Look at that man, he's going to beat Finn to a pulp!" A man chimed. The one from the bar.

"What could he have done?" Another voice asked.

A man stepped out from the line of men waiting by the pool table. He'd come along with his cue stick. He was a lean, heavy-lidded dull man with a crooked nose and full lips. Not what Paul had been expecting, He had a thick beard that Paul could only imagine himself having. "Got a minute?" His tone was soft, pleading. Paul walked closer to the man who visibly tightened his grip around his cue stick. "You're not going to need that," Paul pointed to the stick. The man was uncertain.

Paul tapped the man's arm.

"AYEEE, WE'RE NOT FIGHTING, GO BACK TO YOUR DRINKS,"

"Piss off!" A woman responded.

Tough crowd.

Paul looked back at the lean man with the twitching eyes. "I just need a minute and I'll be on my way. My wife is probably worried sick about me," He thought yet again of Claire and he was sick to his stomach. And

excited. He was beginning to see her as more than just his fiancé. She was his wife. She would be if he could wrap his hands around this situation with his mother and return to the life, they'd left on pause in Portland. He'd never been gone this long without an explanation. He'd stolen a glimpse at his watch, it was nearing midnight. His stomach was in knots.

Finn whispered something to the man closest to him and handed him his cue stick.

Paul subtly pumped a fist.

He led the way towards the front of the bar, next to the woman who hadn't looked up from her phone once since Paul had wondered into the bar, the woman in her workday attire.

"Can I get you boys anything?" A voracious blonde leaned against the bar her inflated chest pressed against the marble. Paul shrugged and looked to Finn who couldn't take his eyes of the woman's chest.

"Nothing thanks," Paul answered on behalf of the coroner.

"Got some real balls stalking someone from the Sherriff's department."

"I didn't stalk you," Paul corrected. "I didn't even know what you looked like till you walked out with a cue stick,"

"Who the fuck are you and how the hell did you know I would be here?" Finn rephrased and looked at Paul with angry doubtful eyes.

"I'm Paul Campbell, the son of the woman you've been tearing open and studying for days now down at the county morgue." His eyes went round. Paul ought to be used to that reaction. "And a sweet-old Gertrude Green let it slip that you would be here." Paul gestured to his surroundings. He felt compelled to add; "And I'm not new to Tillamook as you must know having access to my family's file. So, American Angels was an easy drive."

Finn whispered something beneath his breath then said; “Mr. Campbell, how can I help you?” The man’s countenance changed. Not only had his shoulders eased, but his eyes had blazed with excitement. It was his turn to tap Paul on his forearm. “Don’t take my initial reaction to heart, I’ve had quite the day and being cooped up in a morgue can get to ya’.”

“I can’t imagine,” Paul managed.

“Let’s get a drink, huh? What’s your poison?” Finn waved the blonde over.

“That won’t be necessary, got the wife waiting remember?”

“Ahh, she wouldn’t mind a couple guys getting a drink and opening up, would she?” The blonde approached them.

“What will it be?”

“Heineken, two bottles, and make them chilled.”

Paul cleared his throat.

"One," He shooed her away, then returned his attention to Finn, his expression closed up and eyes warning. "Don't take this the wrong way, buddy, but I don't know you, nor do I want to. I admit it, I stalked your ass, but it sure as hell wasn't to share a beer. I just want to claim my mother's body and I would be on my way with my wife to Portland."

The man lifted an eyebrow seemingly unfazed by Paul's outburst.

"What do you mean by claim her?" He leaned against the bar.

"I want possession of her body so it can be laid to rest next to my father," His jaw tightened at the mention of his father. It had been decades since he'd visited his father's grave. Blake hadn't permitted visits, she believed he was with them, in their home. In a bloody picture. The thought had him shaking his head.

"Mr. Campbell," He was flung back to reality at the sound of his name. "I hate to be the one to break it

to you since this is your first murder investigation, but…She's the government's property." Paul Campbell's expression hardened. "She is not to be moved or touched by anyone outside the morgue staff until a killer is caught and a verdict is reached as to what sentence that man would face." Finn explained.

Paul gritted his teeth.

Claire Fisher had perched herself by the hotel window, drawn the thin white curtains out of her way, her feet tapping against the wooden floorboards, her hip jutted out and hands folded over her fairly large chest. She'd been beckoning the familiar robust build of the Sienna she and Paul had collectively rented for their stay in Tillamook to pull into the rear parking lot. It had occurred to her that he could have pulled into the front parking by the main entrance to

the building, but she didn't have a view of that.

And she hated to admit it, but this was a distraction from the anxiety that surged violently through her veins.

They hadn't started their day on the best foot. The silent treatment had been their morning and being the bigger person, she'd tried to break it with a text that had been viewed and ignored. She'd barely taken it into consideration. That had been in the afternoon and she'd been on the computer delving into her revisor of legal knowledge. She'd seen the news reports. She had the facts. Blake Campbell had been pursued from her kitchen up to the master bedroom and stabbed a total of ten times in the chest and stomach regions and when that hadn't been enough, she'd been strangled to death. The detail of a wedding dress threw the authorities and many reporters for a loop.

Claire had looked through Tillamook's online registry of

elopement centers and chapels. There was nothing on a fifty-six-year-old bride to be. What type of wedding would that be anyway without the presence of her only son? Claire tossed out the idea of a wedding. This was more than mere provocation. This was premediated, and Claire was convinced the dress had to be a taunt by the killer. A way of marking his territory… not that she was going to work Paul up with the information.

A keenness had seethed within her. Since their flight had scraped its tires against the tar on the Tillamook General Airport almost three nights ago, Claire Fisher had found a purpose aside sitting and waiting for her grieving fiancé. And for that reason, she'd poured herself into a theory that might answer the question burning at the back of the mind of everyone in the small town; who was responsible for the brutal murder of Blake Campbell.

Claire Fisher had researched into this family, whatever the internet had on the Campbell's she'd printed and spread out on the carpet. The afternoon had burned out, her zeal hadn't. It was after the darkness had come out to play that she'd really gotten into her work. The first article that piqued her interest beneath the night that featured a glacial air creeping in from the open window, was a short one. It made mention of the rather messy divorce between Christopher Campbell and a Melissa Slater. The divorce had been a no-fault, the website had mentioned 'irreconcilable differences' as the reason for separating, the petitioner for the divorce; Christopher Campbell.

There wasn't much else written on the website aside the fact that it had been filed in a Circuit Court for the State of Oregon for the County of Tillamook. The documents she'd had present for the case had been the

Petition for Dissolution of Marriage and Decree of Dissolution of Marriage as well as an Affidavit Supporting Stipulated Judgment of Dissolution Motion for Waiver of 90 Day Waiting Period, Notice of Statutory Restraining Order Preventing Dissipation of Assets. Under Missing the website had listed Marital Settlement Agreement. How then had they been able to move forward with the motion?

Divorces in the United States were fault and or no-fault and she didn't know much about Tillamook but from what the internet provided it seemed to be no-fault. But whatever the case, a motion for a divorce could be hindered by improperly filed documents.

Leaving the tab open, she'd leaped to another and run a background search on Melissa Slater. Having to alter her search by adding the year the divorce was filed she was able to pop up an image of a man

recognized as Christopher Campbell and a woman Claire assumed to be a Melissa Slater. She was young, Caucasian. She'd had short, curled hair and thin glinting eyes. The picture was barren of color. Melissa had apparently been an antique store founder and owner. She'd founded a company she'd opened with her then husband Christopher Campbell, a store that was known popularly as Campbell's antiques.

Blake Campbell had taken over Campbell's antiques and run it as her own company.

Had ownership been legally transferred?

What had happened to Mellissa after the divorce?

Claire had paced the room unable to calm her restless mind. The night had still been young as at then.

Returning to the desk by the second window in the petite room, the curtains slowly flapping against the open glass, she tried and failed at

drawing up information on legal transfer of ownership of Campbell's antiques. She wasn't sure what section in particular of the Uniform Commercial Code talked about transfer of title, it had been a while since she'd taught Commercial Law. Assumably, she'd run a brief search on sections two to four-hundred-and-three. Somewhere in there had to talk about a shift in title.

As time marched on, unaware of the panic her nervous system welcomed, she delved deeper into her findings from world of legal research.

Essentially, If the title in the goods, the goods being Campbell's antiques wasn't properly transferred, ownership would still belong to the seller, Melissa Campbell.

Time had picked up it pace and by the time she'd decided to call it a day, it was 11:30 P.M. and she was yet to hear from her fiancé.

Worry hadn't set in like a rock in a body of water. No. It had taken its

time, coming in the form of a soft, unsuspected paranoia. Someone had gone after his mother.

A certain someone that Claire believed went by the name Melissa Campbell.

Not only had the divorce process been improperly finalized, but the ownership of the company she founded was improperly transferred.

There wasn't much on Blake Campbell's early life.

It was then she'd begun her glare outside the bedroom window. Urging their Sienna to pull into the rear parking.

With nothing better to do, and eyes too swollen from staring at the computer screen for hour at a time, she'd yet again peered over her shoulder at the wall clock. It was nearing 1:15 A.M. and Paul was yet to respond to the goofy faced emoji she'd dropped in his inbox, just as a way of checking in.

Their room was a mess with facts, statutes and cases she'd printed out and scattered over the carpet. She had a plan. She would make the most of her stay in Tillamook.

She wouldn't be able to get anyone to believe her now, not until she had evidence.

But she had a suspect. Melissa Campbell, Christopher's wife. She didn't need to delve into the internet to confirm that his marriage to Blake Campbell was invalid as far as his marriage to Melissa wasn't properly dissolved.

And to her that was enough.

Melissa Campbell had a motive, two for that matter. Her husband had left her for another woman who he'd been living with and sleeping with till he'd died with his other woman, and her company he'd illegally handed over to his new woman. This was provoked, but it was as well premeditated, and it would answer the question of the wedding dress.

Claire fisher was restless, her expression twisted in anxious wait.

Even if Paul wasn't too pleased with her, he'd never ignored her beyond a couple of hours. This was getting too much.

It was past one and she didn't have it in her to stare at the room computer any longer.

She was more interested in the window and compelling a large Sienna to pull into the parking lot.

Her efforts had been in vain.

Rachel Olson wasn't one to go back on her decision. Especially not when it concerned something, she firmly believed in. She was convinced justice went a step farther than just catching a killer. No one could shift her perspective. It was more than putting some guy in prison. Who's to say he once he was there, he could get his hands on a lawyer that would reopen his case? Who's to say he

wouldn't find a way years later to get out on good conduct? To her, it meant working hand in hand with lawyers to ensure that whoever had hurt a victim would pay with their blood or tears. It had been difficult getting her off her high horse and onto the street towards the City P.D. on 3rd Street.

The Sherriff had been… rather compelling.

For the sake of her job, she'd crawled to the City Police Department, her tail between her legs and she'd requested for the office of Detective Chase Dawson. She'd been to the City P.D. quite a number of times. It hadn't changed in the years she'd spent away. It was standard, white danced across every wall. The United States flag had been erected by the entrance as if to add color to the foyer. It had been clustered with people, many of which had been there to make a complaint. She'd barely had the receptionist's attention. He was a middle-aged man with tired droopy

eyes that sat behind a window. She'd been directed up the flight of stairs to his right and through a hall lined with officers who'd made notable enough names to be hung on the wall between the vending machine, a row of unmarked doors, and the lone file cabinet. Those pictures had lined either side and further down the hall she got, she hadn't seen even one of Detective Dawson. Weren't Detectives allowed on the wall?

She'd knocked on his door, the fourth from the vending machine. listened and let herself in at the faint 'come in' that followed.

His sultry workspace was defined by the firm, familiar scent she'd grown to associate with him. A seductive woody incense-like aroma. His office was a shoebox in comparison to hers. She'd never had a reason to make her way down to the City P.D.'s lead Detective's office. She wished she ought to. She scrunched up her face. Is this what

Detectives were entitled to at the City P.D.? This couldn't be worth it. He'd managed to squeeze in one row of drawers in the corner, a crime board, and a desk with two seats. He didn't even have an air conditioner, he'd had his window cracked open behind his desk and his buttons halfway undone, his sleeves rolled up to his forearm.

Her mouth had open and shut.

He'd been at his desk, his eyes on hers, a hand on the table in a fist and the other on his waist. "Not the best conditions, but I've still handled more murder cases than you, goes to show you don't need the best to be the best."

"Cocky," She pointed out inching further into the room. It had been branded the same color as the rest of the building. White, although his office didn't have an American flag shoved in one corner. She didn't think there would be any more walking room if there were a flag in the corner.

"Nope, just observant." He gestured for her to take a seat. She did, placing her bag on the wooden floors.

"You know there's still an opening if you want to hold the door open for me at the Sherriff's department?"

"Still as funny as the last time." He said, his tone seething with sarcasm.

"Yeah, some douche listened to some asshole and now we're recruiting, and I think you might be our guy,"

"I didn't send in an application though," He leaned back in his seat. He was broad in the sizable desk chair. She hadn't taken her eyes off the way his body adjusted into it with ease, every once in a while, she would sneak a glance at the exposed skin that taunted her from beneath his white button-down. She wasn't too sure what had been more enticing, the thin line of hair that disappeared

beneath the fabric or the barely visible dark ink she wasn't sure was there or not. Her heart galloped in her chest.

She met his gaze, it burned with solemnity. "Look, we don't see eye to eye."

"Is it that obvious?" He cracked a smile, a small one. "Because here I thought we were getting along." Her chest rose and fell with a deep breath.

"I take cases a little too seriously," She'd been half expecting him to hit her with a sarcastic comment. One that would irk her. He didn't. He'd brought his hands together, steepled them, and looked at her, almost as if he'd been trying to grasp at a reason why she acted the way she did. And when her restless hesitant eyes shuffling beneath his gaze wouldn't tell him what he wanted, he'd asked.

"Why?" He was curious. She flushed her expression blank. His question had broken the lock on the door of memories she'd kept closed.

Everything didn't come spilling out. A single one dropped from the open door. Her mother's death. She was washed with the dissatisfaction of that case as if it hadn't happened many years ago. Her mouth snapped shut, lips set in a hard line and jaw clenched.

They were work partners, there were boundaries. He didn't need to know the reason why she acted the way she did.

"I… there was a case, a long time ago," She fiddled with her hands beneath the table, picking at an old scab. "And I never felt like something was done. I felt like something further could have been done, but it wasn't. And I swore that when I got on the force, I would go the extra mile no one was willing to go for me." Her voice cracked.

He hadn't said anything. She bit her lip.

She looked up at him, that smile, the teasing one had returned.

"Never pegged you as the selfish type, Olson." He didn't know when to stop, did he? She shook her head and pushed herself upright. Selfish? She'd just poured out more than she'd been willing, she'd just confided in him and his take was that she was selfish? "No, no, don't leave. I'm just pointing out that we all have our interests in this case. You want to feel justified, and I want… Well, it doesn't matter what I want."

She tucked a lock of curled hair behind her ear and looked at him. "You want to close the case and be done with it, probably add it to your collection of closed cases." She thought back to the wall. If he'd closed so many cases, why hadn't he been put up on that wall? She knew it was stupid and presumably only people with connections at the top of the City P.D. could get that but they couldn't turn a blind eye to his effort, could they?

"That's not it." He nodded for her to return to her seat. "I…" He ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "You know what, forget it." He clapped, the sudden noise rattling a scatter-brained Detective Olson. Her eyes had scooted along with his swivel chair towards the drawer by his left. He drew open the middle one with an effort and a loud scrape of friction on rusted metal. He pulled out a file marked Blake Campbell and tossed it to her.

Cautiously, Rachel Olson flipped it open. The first page was their victim's portfolio with an image of her pinned to the top. Her eyebrows creased. She continued to flip through the records she'd already acknowledged on the precincts database… until she saw it. The last page. It was her turn to smile.

"Our victim was quite popular back in the day. Every newspaper wanted to carry her story… the problem was, if she was as popular as

the people claim, why was her antique business bankrupt?" He reached into the metal cabinet for two more files. He didn't hand them over just yet.

"Unless, she was popular for all the wrong reasons." Detective Olson's eyes broadened.

"There we go!" He tossed the remaining files to her and violently shut the drawer. She winced at the sharp noise. "Our victim, though named Tillamook's most influential business woman by Tillamook Times, had more enemies than fans."

"Got anyone that can corroborate this theory?" She shut Blake Campbell's file and reached for Faith Thompson's file. There wasn't much on the woman, other than her basic information; date of birth, height, address…

"Katherine Tapper, worked as an intern at Campbell's Antiques. Got bumped up to owner after the death of the deceased." Detective Olson

resisted the urge to leave her jaw slacked.

"That's motive."

"Exactly." He echoed with a triumphant grin.

"Can we talk to her?" He shook his head and rose to his feet. Rounding the table, he took two steps to the crime board he'd squeezed by the entrance. On it, he had a picture of two women on the left edge of the board, a map of Tillamook in the middle, and a man at the right. She recognized the two women from the files. Both had been held up with a red thump tack. The map that had been taped to the board had thumbtacks as well, but those—deep blue—seemed to be strategically positioned over various parts of town. The man's image to the right had been tacked with a bright yellow pin… what did that mean?

"We don't need to talk to her. I have a little birdie doing my dirty work." Her lips pursed. "I caught

wind of a banquet our deceased had attended in her thirties, organized by some… Dean family, supposedly, they were one of Tillamook's big leagues."

"How does that have anything to do with our case?" She flipped through the last file that sat askew on his desk before her. Inside the man's picture had been pinned and much like Katherine's file, they didn't have much on him.

"Our Jane Doe didn't just wander into this party, she was invited, escorted." She still didn't get the connection he wanted her to make. He leaned and tapped the folder eagerly. "The man that escorted her, Richard Dean—"

"Was found dead the following morning." He returned to his seat.

She couldn't deny the rush of adrenaline she felt. It was pumping in her veins. "Thought you didn't care about this case, Dawson?" Her smile

broadened into a grin. She ran her fingers over the report.

He shrugged. “I say a lot of things, Olson. I guess I’m just glad you actually listen.”

“I will always listen.” She drew her bottom lip between her teeth. “So, you’ll come back?” She pressed a hand on his table.

“Sherriff Pierce sent you, here didn’t he?”

“No, he didn’t,” She tried to deny it.

“He called me and told me everything would be smoothened out,”

“Shit!” She cursed but found it in her to chuckle. “So, truce?”

“We can discuss that over a beer, I know this great bar, and don’t worry your colleagues wouldn’t be there this time.”

Nenny May

CHAPTER FOUR

Paul Campbell stirred; a burst of sharp pain shot up his arms that had been folded to support his head. He sat up, smacked across the face by a rough surge of nostalgia as his eyes adapted. It wasn't the first time he'd blacked out on the marble surface of American Angel's bar. It had been a frequent occurrence in his teenage years. Back then he'd been the champ at drinking contests, one shot after another, Campbell would down it and he'd be the last one standing. That was until everything would come hurling back and he'd rouse from his

booze-induced slumber, barely making it to the employee bathroom.

His man Cam had manned the bar back then, grown man, middle-aged at the time with thick curly hair, creamy skin, and a voice that belonged on the radio.

"Well, well, well, guess he's alive." A familiar feathery voice declared. He was yet to adapt to the light glaring in through the bar's windows. "For a second there I thought I would have to call back your Medical Examiner buddy." The busty blonde addressed him. His head throbbed a dull ache.

"Where's he?" His own voice was unfamiliar to him, drowned away in one too many tequila shots. He massaged his temple.

"In a better condition than you," The blonde walked up to him, turned, and reached for a cup on the rack, and placed it in front of him. "Left while you were on your third." Typical. She poured to the rim of the cup a bottle

of water and pushed it all the way to him. Reaching into her apron, she produced a sachet of pills. Painkillers. He could kiss her. “I should have stopped you then, but where’s the fun in that?” He popped two pills and chugged it in a single go and pushed the glass cup back for a refill. “So, what is it, wife leave you? Cheat on you? We get a lot of those around here.” She leaned against the marble; her generous chest pressed against it. That ought to hurt, pressed against the edge of a marble bar top. Unless they weren’t real. Steeling himself, Paul resisted the urge to shake his head. She pushed herself upright and reached for the bottle yet again, spilling its content into his cup. “I say so because, you couldn’t shut up about having to run home to the wife.” He wasn’t one to pursue artificial women. Not that they weren’t beautiful in their own way, they just didn’t cut it for him. “Buddy,

eyes up here." She pushed the glass cup back to him and gestured.

He lifted his gaze.

"Neither." He finally responded. "And should you really be listening in to your drunk client's ramblings?"

"No, but yours was particularly interesting,"

"How so?" There was a distant look in her eyes.

"Because when I requested to call you a cab, you stumbled into me, kissed me and told me that she could go to hell,"

His blood ran cold. His brows drew together. "I… I am so sorry… I… shit!" His eyes dropped to the marble tracing the grey lines on the white surface. He could feel it, the rose tint in his skin. "Did I really?" She began to chuckle to herself.

"Gullible too," Her laughter grew. There was a crease in the corner of her mouth when she laughed. Laugh lines, Blake had them, as a kid he'd wondered why she did, and he didn't.

He supposed they added to the bartenders' domineering looks. He was yet to see the amusement in what she'd put him through. "You did refuse to leave my bar, kept saying it's the closest thing to home you have left."

Even blackout drunk the guilt tossed him about. That hotel was temporary, no matter how hospitable they made it, it fell short of the real thing. He was back, in his hometown and his family home was barricaded with police tapes, he hadn't seen it for himself, but he'd seen footage on the news.

American Angels was more than just the booze. It was a hang-out spot, an after-school spot, it was where he'd had his first kiss, where Samantha Baker had sat him down by the window three weeks into their relationship and dumped him because her parents were moving.

He'd told her about the weird stench the place hadn't been able to

shake even when it was empty. Shortly after which he'd proceeded to beg her to stay.

She hadn't.

The stench still plagued the neighborhood bar. The frequent customers didn't seem to mind if last night's crowd was any indication.

He pointed with his thumb towards her chest. "Are they real?" She huffed; her eyes rolled.

"Asshole," She made sure he'd heard it as she'd retreated to the other end of the bar and begun wiping it down.

"I didn't even ask if I could touch them!" She didn't bother with a glance in his direction. That was her business.

With nothing to do, he glanced at the walls. Dark polished Walnut branded nearly half of the room. It was in need of replacement. "Whoever did the woodwork here is the real ass," He was tempted to leap to his feet and run his hands over the

stained cheap finish, and the chipped edges. “Whatever you paid for this; you were ripped off.”

Not all visits to Campbell’s House of Timber were drab and boring. Some—Paul’s favorite—were field trips across the country to CHT’s client’s homes to overlook the installation. He’d picked up a thing or two about woodwork. Not that he’d had the opportunity to flaunt it. “It’s been years since I got my hands dirty, but if you’re interested, I’ve got nothing to do for a few months, I could give this place a fixer-upper?”

She was returning glass cups beneath the bar.

“Alright fine, I’m sorry. It was rude of me to ask about that.” He’d kept his attention centered on her, she was ignoring him, but she hadn’t kicked him out.

Yet.

“It was misogynistic, and objectifying, you are more than just your chest,”

The silence in the air was beginning to hang heavy.

"You know what fuck it." She peeled open a packet of canned beers and begun loading them into the refrigerators. "I'm tired of saying this, I'm tired of getting the same reaction whenever I say this," He stretched his hands out before him. He was glaring at a bottle of Hennessey on display. "I just lost my mother to a killer whose still on the loose." His voice was breathy, croaked.

She paused but didn't turn towards him.

"That medical examiner 'buddy' has been examining her since it happened. And I had just come to the realization that she's going to stay there in that morgue for months or years until the case is closed."

She reached for another can and loaded it into the open fridge.

His shoulders fell. She shut the door to the fridge.

"Susanne." She turned to him. "The name's Susanne or Sue, but if I hear it from your lips, you're out of my bar, deal?" He stretched his arms over his head but nodded. "I take it you're a Campbell." She'd heard his story. Well, not particularly his, but his mother's. He gulped the chilled water she'd left for him greedily.

"Guilty," He held up his empty glass as if to say cheers.

"I've never met someone from a famous family, how does it feel Campbell, your family is all over the news?" She chucked the plastic that once held six beer cans into the trash beneath the bar.

"It's shitty I'll tell you that…" He trailed off eluding a yawn. His days haven't been the best and the nights were much worse. Not that he would admit it to a stranger, this was the first time he'd gotten a wink since his mother's passing. "And the reporters never seem to get my good side," He said referencing the overhead

television that was rerunning a video of him escaping the cameras to his car. It was a video they'd taken on his first trip to the Sherriff's department. He'd been scowling and shoved a hand towards the cameras and when they'd refused to get out of his view, he'd flashed them the middle finger. He cringed at the film.

"You're better looking in person, that's for sure." She pointed out, a dreamy look in her eyes.

"Thanks, but…" He shook his head. "So, are you taking me up on my offer?"

Susanne's face scrunched up in confusion. "What offer?"

"To fix her up," He pointed to the walls. "I have years of woodworking experience."

"Oh, really?" She didn't sound convinced.

"Think of it as a great deal to boost business," He bit back on a comment about her titties boosting business. If she didn't kick him out

before, that comment would send him packing. He drew his bottom lip between his teeth and smiled.

"Come on, Sue," He pleaded, his eyes sparkling with mischief. She didn't blaze with agitation at the sound of her name, if anything, her cheeks had turned the slightest shade of pink. "Give me a shot."

"What does this work experience of yours entail?"

"I worked with my Dad at his Timber exporting company for years and, it would be an honor to remodel my second home,"

She gave his words some thought. "I'll sleep on it."

He nodded. She walked towards him and retrieved the sachets of pills she'd left out for him. "Your wife, what's she like?"

"Can we not," He stopped her. Thoughts of Claire meant thoughts of a wedding, one his mother would never attend. Claire meant wedding dresses; he shook the fleeting thought

from his head. It returned. Whoever had done this had intentions for his wedding with Claire and the dress his mother had died in was a clear sign.

He fought the pressing thoughts and allowed himself a bit of trouble. “So, you think I’m hot?” She shook her head and turned away reaching for a bottle and placing it back where it belonged on the shelf.

“Putting words in a lady’s mouth isn’t very gentleman of you.” Paul bent his head, left then right relishing in the satisfying crack. Anxiety gurgled within him. He paid more attention to the adrenaline that surged in his veins.

His mouth twitched with an almost smile. “I could be putting other things in your mouth, Darling. I’m not trying to be a gentleman.” She looked at him, in her eyes was a short-lived shock, with it accompanied a dull flame of desire, a flame he’d lit. It was his choice to fan it and watch it grow or stomp it out. He’d made one

too many bad decisions the previous night. What was one more?

Deliberations sent him into a lust-driven haze.

He reached for the empty glass cup she'd left by him and ran his pointer finger gently over the rim.

"You're married, Mr. Campbell." She'd chosen her words carefully, her eyes concentrated on his lips. She was hesitant. She'd tried to keep her tone neutral, to keep the curiosity and faint concern from her breathy trembling voice.

"Don't tell me you've never gotten a little naughty?" He looked up at her, an eyebrow raised.

She swallowed hard. He had easier things she could swallow.

He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, aroused at the idea.

Once more leaning against the counter, she pretended to consider his words, a hand over her rosebud lips. Closer, he'd taken the time to drink her in, savor her. She had skin a rose

hue, eyes flecked, a cornflower blue. Her face was heart-shaped, brows carved, and nose pointed. She was anything but his type. He'd allowed his eyes linger on her chest, full and round, she had the breasts of an actress, a foreign one, perhaps French.

He'd never craved a woman of her nature before. It was new to him. Exciting.

Her breasts jiggled as she moved and closer he was beginning to doubt she had a bra beneath her loose-fitting blouse. How hadn't he noticed it before?

He loathed to admit it, but the slow subtle bounce they made against each other made him harder than he could comprehend.

There was a futile desire within him that he was fighting to control.

Pressed against marble they seemed swollen, curiosity nudged at him and temptation urged him to assess just how soft they would be beneath his large hands or pushed

against his chest. “That depends, Mr. Campbell, how naughty do you mean?” For a moment, his jaw clenched.

“Bad girl,” He scolded. “Just the way I like my women. Now tell me, you’ve never had fantasies of being with a married man?”

He should have stomped it out. He was getting reckless.

He continued to fan the flame.

“Now that you mentioned it, I’ve had a few,” She turned scarlet.

He smirked, thrilled. “Do you have somewhere I can bring these fantasies to life?” She straightened, turned, undid her apron in a swift motion and tossed it on the countertop, and opened a small door at the other end of the bar.

There was something about danger that roused an intense craving in him. Something about being wicked for the first time since life had taken his family from him.

Since life had taken his home from him.

“We’re not opened for a little while anyway. And I’m the only one here,” He rose from his seat, his legs stretched. Susanne was a woman on a very illicit mission. She went for the door first and turned the lock. Unmoved he’d taken in the rest of her. Her body was petite aside from her voluptuous chest. Her legs were strong like a runner.

He didn’t know her, he didn’t need to, nor did he want to, and yet his skin burned with an unexplained need to feel hers on his, to run his hands over her bare torso as their lips painted the color of their fleeting passion.

He didn’t need anything more. She would be his painkiller. He, her poison.

“And besides, what the wife doesn’t know won’t kill her, know what I mean?” He said more to

himself. It did nothing to ebb the guilt that nibbled at him.

It would come back stronger with time, for now, it was nibbles, later it would be overbites and he would be a helpless prey.

"She's a really lucky girl," She said sarcastically.

She led him to a table at the back of the bar like some cattle to the slaughterhouse and he'd followed willing to die in a sinful creamy release. If there was anything that made his pants tight at the waist, it was a woman who could take the lead.

She'd pushed him softly against a chair by the wall and joined, straddling him. "Yes, she is," He'd whimpered, an answer to her comment even if she didn't need one. It was a vain last attempt at backing out. A last attempt at saving himself.

Here he was a play toy in the hands of guilt and grief, anxiety waiting in the corner to take a turn

when the sun retreated at dusk, his mother alone on some cold coroner's examination table, cut open and scrutinized, her case open for public discussion and the last family he had, his fiancé; shoved aside, ignored and neglected and all he wanted were those strong, athletic legs of the blonde sensual bartender wrapped around his waist as he pounded his pain away.

He couldn't be saved.

She had the same idea, because gently, teasingly, she'd brushed her lips against his, testing the water. His heart jolted in his chest. He hadn't pulled away. She'd claimed his lips, static exploded within him, her kiss, urgent, demanding.

This was different from Claire's, which was patient, caring.

Susanne ached for him as much as he did her.

It meant nothing.

It was a spur-of-the-moment affair. An impulse. Claire didn't need to know.

His eyes squeezed shut, he returned the kiss, a hand brushing against her neck, sending her quivering. She was desperate for him.

He wasn't the useless son who couldn't play a part in his mother's murder investigation.

That morning, in the arms of the blonde bartender, he was the man that could run her mad with a delicious pleasure.

Groaning, he pinned his hands on her hips and held her in place. She hiccupped a laugh. It had been a while since he'd given in to his bad side. His hands cupped her butt cheeks. Running, walking, whatever she was doing was exquisite for her glutes.

She smelled of liquor and coffee. A taunting blend.

Her tongue was sweet like a morning cup of Joe. Stopping wasn't an option, not with the way she'd

thrust her tongue between his parted lips, greedy, her head bobbing softly. She kissed like an expert. He had a hand curled around her neck, another up her shirt. She hadn't thrown a bra on underneath. He was drunk with lust. Her skin against his hands was breathtaking, smooth as silk, and deliciously immoral.

His tongue swirled with hers and she'd leaned into him, clinging to his shirt, a black loose-fitting round neck.

She hadn't held back. Claire would have, she was always obsessed with getting the mood right.

Susanne didn't care about the mood.

She acted of a primal hunger that made a reckless man of him.

She'd claimed him with her sinful tongue and his inhibitions had melted away.

That was the last thread of control he had.

He'd gone ravenous, her shirt thrown over her head and flung on the wooden floor, scrapped.

He didn't care for the starving smile she'd pinned him with.

Claiming her fluffy right breast in his hand, thumbing the nipple, and grinning at the way she'd responded to him, he pressed his face into the left one, his tongue running over the perked nipple.

Awarded by a low insistent groan from the back of her throat. Arching her back, she leaned into him.

He savored and tormented her with a slow graze of his teeth against her sensitive spot. He was granted a breathy moan.

He circled between sucking, nibbling, and twisting her nipples on his damp tongue, his right-hand twisting and pulling her left breast.

Her demands were louder, he pulled away. "I'm only getting started, Darling, you might want to hush-up." He met her blue eyes; they

were ablaze with a crazed look. She hadn't protested, but her body had quivered against him. "Get up," She frowned, unmoving. "Can't you hear me, get up." He gestured with his head for her to get off of him. Her eyes squeezed shut and she let herself off his solid frame. "I want to have a little fun, pants down, Princess." Her response was slow. He rose to his feet. "You're opening in a few minutes; we could do this now or when customers are banging against the door?" He'd said, standing, his cock pressing hard against the zipper of his jeans. He wasn't sure how much he could take before he would have to seek release in her gooey middle.

She did as she was instructed and unbuckled her pants letting them fall by her ankles. He gave a lopsided grin as he took in the disarming sight of Susanne naked. He dampened his bottom lip and nodded for her to get against the table. She did and he'd

kicked her legs apart and lowered himself to his knees at her backside that was better than most in his opinion.

Her panties, a lacy, speedy red, called to him. He drew them out of his way, sent them on a one-way trip to where her pants were at her ankles. Paul ran his tongue over the tinted back of her thighs. She trembled, he continued to work his way inward. He hesitated before meeting her in the middle and run his hands slowly downwards from the side of her hips, he wanted her to beg for it. Her whimpering was tempting, and he'd trailed a sloppy line from her back of her thighs inward. He paused again, this time, she'd spoken up. "Please," She'd forced, he couldn't see her face, but he assumed it was scrunched up and crimson, strained and mad with an insatiable desire.

It had been years since he'd tamed a woman. Years since his demons had resurfaced.

“Please what?” He’d said mere inches from her dripping core.

“Touch me, Mr. Campbell,” Her voice, a squeak.

He trailed circles with his fingers on the back of her thighs. “I am touching you,” She shuddered.

“Asshole, either finish what you started, or I will.” He chuckled.

He missed this power.

A killer had stripped him of all power.

Death had taken everything from him.

When he’d met her center, a warm pool, he’d heard his name. Not Mr. Campbell as she’d called him, no, she’d moaned his first name. Paul.

He hated the sound of it. Because knew that name belonged to Claire. Not a random bartender. At the thought of his fiancé, he was tempted to pull away to put an end to what he’d started. He did, and her head had jerked in his direction, a gasp escaping from her lips. “It’s Mr.

Campbell," He grumbled and smacked a hand against her firm butt, pleased by the branding mark he'd left behind. "Face forward, until I'm done, you aren't to look left, right, or backwards."

Claire didn't need to know about this. She would never need to find out about this.

He returned his face to Susanne's core before the guilt could get its claws on him. Much like how she'd thrust her tongue into his mouth, he'd repeated the motion between her legs, and her moans had grown impatient, louder. He parted, squeezed her cheeks in his hands, and rose to his feet, taking his time to stretch his legs. She was a good listener. She hadn't turned. Satisfied with this, he'd pressed a hand on the small of her back, until her upper half was completely bent against the table. And one finger after another, he explored her, prepared her. She was dripping

on his fingers and he had two in when he'd reached his limit.

He withdrew his hands and ran them over his tongue, she was squeamish. He could imagine how red her face would be. He didn't want to see it. He didn't want to be reminded of what he was doing and how it would crush his wife.

Undoing his belt buckle, he pushed his pants and black boxer briefs out of the way, and with an up and down motion with his hands against his shaft, he guided himself into Susanne.

A hand pinned against the small of her back he held her in place, thrusting slowly and building up a pace, her moans and groans kept up and the closer he got, he'd noticed a hand of hers teasing her clit. Yet again she'd called out to him, he'd ignored it, speeding up the pace until all he could hear was the 'ta, ta, ta' of their skin clashing.

He could never tell Claire.

His thrusts were harder.

She would leave him if he would.

He was faster.

He couldn't lose anyone else.

In a white urgent release, he'd crumbled onto the bartender, his eyes fluttering shut and regret breaking down his walls.

What the hell had he just done.

Regan Sinclair was late.

The office of the District Attorney of Tillamook county had Lisa Patterson's jaw slaking. With an enticing view of the running city, the office was on the seventh floor.

A soft blend of Jasmine and Cinnamon helped her unwind as she shrugged off her jacket and lowered herself to one of the empty seats in the room, the one by the pinewood desk.

The walls much like the desk were pinewood and gave off a dark

secluded aura. Shelves lined her left, neither one had room for one more book. To her right were two fabric armchairs, a table between them, a floral centerpiece of daisies bunched in a slim clear vase, an accent to the table, and a wine rack against the wall to Lisa's right. Behind her was a fireplace, above which a single sculpture had been placed.

There were no pictures in the room. Very little personality to read from. Almost as if Regan Sinclair hadn't wanted to make a mark in the office during her tenure.

Lisa had abandoned her jacket and perched herself like a bee to nectar by the daises. She'd always wanted to start a flower garden. The last time she'd been by a homegrown garden had been in her mother Nora Patterson's Tillamook home on 4th street. She was always by the gazebo. Listening to the breeze flirt with the dainty lilies, her eyes on the way the sun would kiss the orchids.

"They're quite a piece, aren't they?" The door to the office opened and shut.

Startled, Lisa straightened, mouth ajar and eyes broad. "I'm quite the enthusiast," She defended her actions.

"And they're real. A pain in the ass to maintain, but they have a way of bringing out a room." Regan said.

Lisa bobbed her head. "I'm Regan Sinclair, it's nice to finally meet you, Mrs. Patterson. Julie has told me a lot about you,"

"Only good things, I hope," Lisa chuckled, her nerves frayed. "And you can call me Lisa."

The woman had mesmerizing eyes sienna brown eyes.

"Alright Lisa," Regan pulled out her desk chair and got comfortable. Lisa returned to her seat. She entertained a glace out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the gradually moving traffic below. Slowly, she felt the tension in her shoulders melt as

Jasmine and Cinnamon did their work on her.

She looked back at the District Attorney. It had been a while since a woman's mere gaze had her transfixed.

Regan Sinclair was a *very* beautiful woman to say the least, slender with porcelain skin, cat-like eyes, neatly carved eyebrows, and an aquiline nose. She had thin glossy lips and sleek pin-straight hair that fell to the middle of her back. Lisa Patterson could see flecks of her neighbor Julie in Regan.

That did nothing to suppress the flutters in her stomach.

She was in awe of the county's District Attorney. She hadn't been expecting someone so… visually appealing.

Regan Sinclair gave Madeline a run for her money and Madeline had all the boy's attention on campus.

"What brings you to my office?" Regan steepled her fingers and pinned

her with a stare, one Lisa often used on her clients, it was an intense stare. “Julie mentioned I would need to draw up a contract exempting you from liability of some sort?”

Lisa cleared her throat, wriggled beneath Regan’s stare, and said; “Yes, I need a contract. I have a special client I’m working with and he’s off record and that’s not allowed. And I would just like him to know and agree to being off record and to… not disclose to the board that he is working with me off the grid.” She felt judged even if the Regan had merely just nodded at her words.

That wasn’t like Lisa.

She released a breath and sat up straight in her seat. Her skin felt warm and tingly.

She couldn’t forget who she was in the presence of someone who eluded more power than she. More graceful authority than she. At the end of the day, she was Counselling psychologist Lisa Patterson, and no

one could take that away from her. The worst Regan Sinclair could do was turn her down, refuse to draw up the contract, and forget they ever met. Any other lawyer could do her bidding.

"Did you bring a copy of your employment contract?"

She found it hard to convince herself Regan turning down an opportunity to collaborate officially was truly the worst.

Lisa Patterson shook her head easing into her seat and mirroring Regan's stare. "I wasn't told to bring anything with me." She tilted her head, a small smile on her face. "I can forward you an electronic copy…That is, on the condition you agree to work with me." A statement.

Regan smiled, impressed. "I like you, you're a quick thinker, Julie never mentioned that." She ran her hands over her keyboard and turned on her desktop.

Lisa scratched the back of her neck. She knew the D.A.'s words meant nothing. She liked her personality, but Lisa couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like if the high ranked woman *liked* her. "But as I mentioned over the phone, I've got my plate full with the Campbell murder and I was hoping I could draw it up right now," Lisa hadn't expected that. "I would just need to peak at your employment contract with the… Umm… Tillamook Wellness Center… if I'm not mistaken?" Lisa nodded. She clicked open a pdf copy of the document.

"Ooh," She reached into her jacket and drew out her phone. Ever since landing her job as lead psychologist with the Wellness Center, and nearly being cheated out of a fair pay months into her service, she'd logged around a copy of her contract. She was yet to renew her terms and conditions.

“And… how’s that going, your investigation, you mentioned over the phone that you would have to file charges, is there like a deadline?” She scratched her nose. She hoped to the heavens that she wasn’t coming off too strong.

“Oddly-specific question,” Regan arched an eyebrow.

Lisa ran her tongue over her bottom lip. She internally winced.

“Over the phone you sounded overworked, and I guessed there was some deadline?” Her voice was calm. On the inside, Lisa was a hormonal mess. She was twenty-five again, and longing for a woman she couldn’t have.

It had taken months before she’d mustered up the courage to say ‘hi’ to Madeline. Nothing could have prepared her for what time had in store. She’d bagged the most longed after girl on campus.

She didn't think she had the same odds now as a graduate and a self-diagnosed work addict.

"Yeah," Regan echoed, now focused on her computer screen. She'd been dragging her mouse over the surface of her table, a thousand-yard look in her eyes. "I'm not going to bore you with too many details," She looked at the door. "But I have people in high places looking to shut this case down before Christmas and I don't see that happening." She blinked; the look was gone. She drew in a long breath and sighed reluctantly.

Lisa Patterson had until Christmas to prove Paul Campbell's involvement in his mother's murder.

The window was slim.

Ten weeks to dig into a woman's background and emerge with some sort of proof that her son had killed her.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to protect your interests."

Regan said reaching out a hand and placing above Lisa's on the desk. Heaving Lisa Patterson from her rouse. Her heart jackhammered and she'd entertained brief whims of slamming the lean woman over her own desk, and doing unspeakable things with a view of the cozy city.

Snatching her hand from beneath Regan's, Lisa pinched the bridge of her nose. She shifted in her seat in a bid to relieve the moisture gathering in her panties. "Exclusion clauses are a way for small businesses and people in general to protect themselves from liability." Lisa couldn't help herself; her lust had her head whirling. The woman was exactly her type. Sensible, successful and made her blood sizzle. She craved for the District Attorney to moan her name. It had been years since she'd been in anything intimate… she'd always been yet to meet someone that met her standards. "Any luck opening that contract?" Lisa blinked. Contract?

Her employment contract! She nodded and slid her phone across the table.

Regan Sinclair picked up the sleek device and ran her eyes over the fine print.

Lisa Patterson stole a glance at the District Attorney. How would she even go about asking Regan out? She didn't know if the D.A. played for the same team… It was nice to envision though.

"Okay, I'm going to make this quick. I'm going to ask you a series of questions building from a template I use for most of my clients." Regan returned the phone to Lisa, their fingers brushing, her touch sending Regan's body into a flame of desire.

Lisa resisted the urge to concede to the intoxication she felt in the presence of the porcelain skinned woman. She beckoned her mind from the gutter and couldn't help but wonder whether she was being selfish? Keeping Paul Campbell from

the board seemed like a good idea on the onset. But then again, Lisa Patterson was defending her insatiable need to get involved in criminal matters. Her nose didn't belong down the Campbell's family dirty laundry. And here she was, preparing herself to delve into a man's past for a mens rea, and recorded confession.

She couldn't shake the guilt that tugged at her. Its hold was strong, but her resolve was stronger.

She'd reminded herself why she was doing this, and that had gotten her all the way from her home to the office of the District Attorney. It wasn't working anymore.

She'd caught a case of cold feet. Especially because of her desire for the District Attorney. It was foolish.

If Regan didn't draw up the contract, she could kiss all future appointments with Paul Campbell goodbye. All future reasons to speak with Regan would be down the toilet. Her stomach dropped.

She wasn't willing to risk that.

Lisa bobbed her head, antsy. A part of her hoped Paul wouldn't go through the contract and would just sign it. She doubted she would be that lucky.

"Now this is just for record purposes, I think it's imperative you know that practicing privately is frowned upon in your establishment and I would strongly advice if you want to go through with this, your sessions with your client should be held on a different premises… or at the very least out of workhours."

Lisa shrugged. "Sure, that's fine with me." She could work with that. Her last session with Paul had been during her lunch break. She could host whoever she wanted during that hour.

"For the sake of this contract, I'm going to need your clients full name, and yours as well." Fingers tapped against a keyboard.

"I would rather he remain anonymous until you agree to my terms." Lisa's lips had been pressed into a thin line. She swallowed hard as she deliberated over what Regan Sinclair's lips would feel like against hers. Adrenaline surged through her veins and she could hear her pulse pounding in her ear. "After all, if you agree to do this, we would be in a contract of our own." Was Regan a good kisser? She looked it.

Lisa marveled over what a make out session with Regan would be like? Would they end up scarcely clothed with little regret? The thought was enticing. It would easily top her affair with Madeline. That had just been the prettiest girl in the University of Portland. This was the District Attorney of Tillamook…

Regan Sinclair bubbled with a giggle. "You are just a ball of trouble, aren't you, Lisa. We should get coffee some time. Maybe, if this works out, I can tell you a little bit more about the

Campbell Murder Investigation." Her eyes broadened, she bit back the grin that fought relentlessly.

The woman had a smile Lisa wasn't going to easily forget.

She wiped down her clammy hands on her grey Balenciaga dress. She didn't want to lunge at the offer. But she was tempted. Lord knew she was tempted.

Steeling herself, she drew her mind from Regan Sinclair's offer and did what she felt was for the greater good. Paul Campbell was a killer and if she had to be a little selfish here and there to prove it, it was worth it.

"My client is Paul Campbell, and my name is Lisa Patterson, Counselling psychologist."

Regan Sinclair's reaction had been subtle. Lisa Patterson hadn't missed it. She hadn't looked up at Lisa, wide-eyed and startled, that was farfetched. But the pace of her fingers clicking against her keyboard slowed

almost as if the words had registered a millisecond later.

“I’m sorry to have to ask this, I’m sure that’s why you’ve rather wanted his identity to remain undisclosed, but did he come to you for counseling, or did you solicit?” This time she turned to Lisa and in her cat-eyes, accusation pranced.

“And what’s that supposed to mean.” Lisa snapped. “With all due respect, that information is between me and my client.” She forced a smile. She knew why her tone had been sharp. “Can we proceed with the questions?”

She needed D.A. Sinclair on her side if she was going to take down the last remaining Campbell. Even if she didn’t get an opportunity with the powerful woman, she would catch a killer and that had to be enough.

Her first step, this contract.

"When I invited you for beers, I thought you were going to be a big girl about it and order something with a cap." Detective Dawson eyed Rachel Olson's drink of choice. While he'd requested a Bud Light, she'd requested a tall glass of Death by Chocolate; a vodka-induced cocktail served as a milkshake with a whipped cream topping and a cherry to boot.

Her bottom lip drew out in a slight pout. "I'm not really a beer kind of girl." She shrugged, wrapping her fingers around the cold glass. "You never told me why you close so many cases." She sipped her cocktail. Too much of a sweet tooth, she'd opted for the one drink that would give her a sugar-rush before the high of alcohol kicked in. They'd been perched by the window of the American Angels bar on 4th Street, the afternoon sun's woven rays like strands, spilled through the thick tinted glass. Seated at the other end of the table, Detective Dawson had completely done away

with his blazer. Despite it being autumn, nearing the middle of October, he didn't seem to acknowledge the chilly weather. She pegged it to working in a stuffy office with one window for one too many years.

He drew a breath. "Because I can." His shoulders rose and fell. She wasn't satisfied with that response. He was evading. She knew a thing or two about evading.

"Come on," She egged. She hadn't in simple terms told him about her mother… but she'd implied it. She'd mentioned the case… she'd welcomed the pang of guilt that punctually jabbed her in the chest each time she tugged open that door. Didn't that count for something? Didn't that mean he could trust her?

His silence was enough of an answer. She fiddled with her straw. He hadn't been looking at her but out the window. It didn't matter. They weren't friends, he wasn't going to

confide in her… Why then did that have her heart thrashing in her chest, her pulse zipping like a freight train. She didn't have anyone else to blame. She'd opened her own mouth, convinced herself that if she made an effort, he would too. What was this, high school? She was nearly thirty-three. She had to get a grip on her own assumptions.

"I'm sorry I asked." She reached for her purse.

"I don't have a reason." He ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "I want to sit here and tell you that I close cases because I have some sort of record… that I do it because of an overbearing need to be the best… but that just isn't true." He reached for his bottle of Bud Light. He chugged nearly half the bottle in a single go. He returned the bottle to the table. "I don't know why I do it. The easiest way I can explain it is because… I can." That couldn't be it. There had to be more. She hadn't taken her eyes off him. He

didn't seem to flinch beneath her gaze.

"That doesn't make any sense." She said gently, irked by the brittle crack in her voice, her hands rested on the table, fingers fiddling with her nails.

He leaned forward, squinting slightly as the sun's strands ran over his skin. "Let me tell you a story," He reached for her hands. He held them firmly in his. Her stomach fluttered. His were large, strong, they weren't calloused like Dan Harriet's. "When I first got to Tillamook with my sister Anna…we didn't know what we were going to do here. Sure, party and eat all the ice-cream and cheesy delicacies this town had to offer was top of the list. But it wasn't long before our pockets ran dry and we needed to find something to keep the nights alive… She went into journalism and I… Well, I joined the force."

"You never had a purpose." He nodded. His deep brown eyes had searched hers. Even in the light, they were almost black. His lips, shimmering a rose pink twitched upwards.

"I guess you could say I'm just the best at what I do, even when I don't give a damn about it." She pulled away and instantly regretted it. She missed the warmth his hands provided. She missed the proximity.

"What did I say about you being cocky?" She reached for her drink. He wasn't the best, he had cold cases wedged between his closed cases. However, she didn't think it was her place to correct him.

He pretended to think, running a hand over his stubbled cheek. "You find it irresistible?" She rolled her eyes at him and took a sip from her glass letting the chocolate and alcoholic blend dance on her tongue. "Now, it's your turn, Olson. I spilled my guts to you, the first woman in

this town that isn't my sister… So, what's your story. Why can't you find it in you to get along with the CSI team?"

She choked on her cocktail and burst into a violent coughing fit. "Woah," She heard Detective Dawson wail. Her throat burned, her eyes watered and she felt a dribble run down her nose… Shit. She reached for a napkin with trembling hands.

Chase Dawson was on his feet in seconds, a napkin pressed to her nose and a hand rubbing on her back. He'd gestured for Susanne to wipe down their table and get rid of the tipped-over cocktail glass.

Her coughing had subsided, but he continued to rub on her back as Susanne approached their table with a rag. She'd looked more disheveled than normal. Her clothes hadn't even been thrown on properly. He made a mental note to ask about that when he got the chance. She picked up the glass and returned to her station

behind the counter. “You know, I’ve had girls choke when they saw me, but when they hear me speak? Now, that’s a first, Olson.” She shook her head clearing her throat. She couldn’t help the small smile on her face. “Don’t think you’re getting out of my question that easy, unless you want to choke on air this time,” She smacked his stomach and he chuckled returning to his seat.

She couldn’t tell him. It was one thing to hash up old wounds about her mother, it was another to dig up what she’d buried from her first marriage. Mathew didn’t just break her heart when he filed those divorce papers. He tore their family apart. At the peak of her career, married to a man she’d convinced herself she loved—a man who clearly didn’t reciprocate her feelings—and adopting a son, his son from his first marriage… she wouldn’t go as far as saying she was happy… there were too many fights, countless truths left unsaid, and a

world of bitter words that can never be taken back… Deliberating over it, she'd been complete. Undeniably, they were two sharp-edged shards, but together, with enough counseling, they'd made a cracked glass.

It was only a matter of time before the cracks spread and the counseling dulled. They'd shattered ten years after. He'd vanished with his son and a greater share of the alimony almost immediately.

"I said it before," She raised her chin. "Those people see me as their boss, and I think… I'm fine with that." She nodded to herself.

She still checked Mathew's Facebook, stalked Sterling's Instagram to make sure they were getting on fine… She was shooting herself in the leg, but she couldn't stop. He'd moved on, touring Rome with his latest blonde bimbo and gushing about her as if she was his world… He'd had two other worlds before her… she didn't want to

succumb to the envy that nagged. She couldn't help it. They weren't going to last. And the person she pitied most was Sterling who'd gotten caught in the middle of his father's countless marriages.

What on earth did the lean blonde woman have that she didn't? Of course, her skin wasn't as pale, she was almond. She didn't have bright blue eyes or freckles, and she clearly wasn't a size three. She was a size sixteen with an uncomfortably wide waist that she gave little thought to.

Mathew had. He always had an opinion on her size, the way she wore her hair… At the time, she'd persuaded herself to trust his love for her, his requests were to fix her, to help her better appropriate the cultures of the people of Tillamook… An odd demand since was as much a local as he was.

She was fine with the divorce; with the dismissal, she'd faced from the CSI team. Her world didn't stop

spinning because Detective Dawson's friends didn't find her appealing. Certainly, the rejection stung worse than a hot iron, but it wasn't something she couldn't handle. Admittedly, she would have liked to have a friend of legal drinking age, but there was nothing against having a fourteen-year-old neighbor as her only confidante.

"So, I take it you're coming back?" He shook his head. She frowned.

"You're going to have to spice up the offer. I need to be baited back, Olson. What do I get in return?" His eyes narrowed, but he gave a lopsided grin.

"We need you back, Dawson. I need you back, so I don't lose my job." He guzzled the rest of his Bud Light.

"Pierce threatened to demote you?" She nodded. "You know he's bluffing right." She didn't want to take the risk. She didn't know what

kind of relationship he had with the Sherriff, but she didn't have it. And she couldn't call his bluff if it meant there was a chance, she would be cheated out of her tight yet tolerable salary.

She leaned back in her seat. "Fine, what do you want?" His dark brown eyes blazed with mischief.

"Annabelle invited me to a work gala to celebrate getting her studio's ratings up. She needs me to bring a plus one and…" Her jaw went slack, her stomach somersaulted. Was he asking her out on a date? Thirty-two-years-and-three-months-old and she couldn't tell when a man was asking her out? This had to be a trick, a prank. This was her partner, her work partner. He didn't see her in a romantic light. But did she? He was cocky, unserious, and unmotivated. He wasn't her type… Then again, who was? Mathew had fit her standards to a T. Though soon after

they'd tied the knot, he'd begun to unravel.

"If I agree to accompany you for this gala, you'll come back to work for the Sherriff's Department?" He nodded like a child on the candy aisle. "Fine."

"It's a date."

Rachel Olson had wanted anything but to return to the scene of the crime. Her last visit had been brief. She doubted she could pull the same strings to get her off and back to her desk. She hadn't gone alone. This time, much to his chagrin, she'd brought Detective Dawson along. It hadn't been an easy sell. She'd agreed to do one activity of his choosing afterward. And that was excluding his sister's event. She didn't know what she dreaded most. The scene or what he was cooking up subsequently.

She didn't loath her day job as lead Detective with the Tillamook

County Sherriff's Department; a chest-puffed member of the Tillamook County Major Crimes Team. How could she despise it though? It paid the bills she couldn't hate it. What she did detest however were the scenes. It told a story, one plagued by death. The Campbell home was the worst she'd faced. She could see herself living a more wholesome life without visits to the crime scene.

Quite the workaholic, Rachel often found it... difficult to turn down a few extra hours. Especially the ones Sherriff Pierce had wedged her with. What he'd failed to mention till she'd turned in that morning had been the detail that those extra hours meant visits to the Campbell home on Miller Avenue.

Initially, she'd thought to overlook it, and maybe, just maybe, the day would be over before she knew it. That hadn't been the case.

She'd admitted it before, and she would do it again. The Campbells had an expensive taste.

The home was modern with an elderly touch, at least what was left of it.

Walking in, one would assume they'd been conveyed to a villa. Whoever the late Blake Campbell had been she'd sat and lavished in the lap of luxury. The marble floors were unaffected by the incident. The living room walls, beige remained untouched by the owner's blood. The chairs, the cream had an old story behind them, accents to the modern aura of the home. There wasn't a television in this room, but there were shelves of books and knickknacks.

"Wonder if we can stake our claim on any of these?" Detective Dawson wandered through the home in as much awe as Rachel had been.

She hadn't been looking at him but at the chandelier that drooped

from the high ceiling. It seemed to be made with crystals.

"Don't think we're that lucky," She gauged his reaction. He was already outstretched on the couch. "I don't think you should be… doing that," She gestured to her partner who'd had his eyes shut.

"Come on, don't be such a sour-puss, join me, imagine what it'll be like to live in a place like this." She couldn't for more reasons than one reason.

"I can't because, hmm… we have to uncover what happened to the last owner and relay that information to the D.A." His eyes parted and he tapped the space next to him.

"Err… We already know what happened to the last owner, she was stabbed ten times and strangled to death." His words had been accompanied by a coy smile. He glanced over his shoulder, left then right. The smile was gone. "And most of the rookies are downstairs." His

voice dropped a few decibels. When he saw that she wasn't budging, he reached out a hand. "I thought we talked about you being less stuck up with your work?"

"We talked about you coming back to work with the Sherriff's department."

"I'm only asking for two minutes on a couch to dream about what it would be like to be rich." Detective Dawson wasn't going to let up. She knew this. It was the same way he'd egged her into doing-some-crazy-out-of-her-comfort-zone-thing with him after work.

She blew out her cheeks and one heavy step after another, she flopped beside him on the couch, her eyes to the ceiling. She couldn't draw her eyes from the shimmering chandelier. It resembled something she'd seen before. Perhaps on an online auction. Whatever the case she would have to work years on her salary to afford a life somewhat similar to what Blake

had enjoyed in the days leading up to her death.

Rachel Olson had done her research. Blake Campbell hadn't gotten this life on her own. Christopher Campbell had worked day and night and spoiled his youthful wife with a home many could only dream of owning, pampered her with the most expensive clothes and jewelry.

She turned to Detective Dawson, he'd had his eyes shut and she'd taken in his chiseled features. Long lashes rested on his defined face. What was once a five o'clock shadow had been replaced by a soft stubble of dark brown hair. Closer, there was a line, faded that ran down from his left eye and vanished beneath the growing hair. A scar. She resisted the urge to trace her finger over it.

She would ask about it sometime. This didn't seem like the right time.

She nibbled on her bottom lip, thinking back to his office, to his dept.

How had she pushed him away when life had been driving him to the curb. “I said imagine being rich, not imagine undressing me, Olson.” She turned away.

He hadn’t once opened his eyes. And she’d been sneaking a glance at the bags beneath his eye when a thought collided into her, this wasn’t about imagining a future, this was about getting a wink of sleep. Sometime to close his eyes and not have a dead woman’s case to handle. She couldn’t help the smile on her face. She dared one final glance at him and shut her eyes easing into the aged fabric couch.

A woman had lounged on this couch unaware that days later she would be killed in the room above.

The thought stirred gruesome memories in Rachel’s gut.

She didn’t want to let them out, but they were banging against the door she’d locked them behind.

"Even years on our salaries a life like this is unlikely." She said forcing herself to think of something else.

"Mhmm…" His eyes parted and he took in the living room and foyer anew. "If I lived in a home like this, I wouldn't lift a finger another day in my life."

"It's going to get lonely, living here, all alone. Maybe wealth isn't all that it's cut out to be?"

"Olson," He warned.

"I mean, Blake had everything money could ask for, a mansion, cars, a son who still ran away to start a life in Portland. She was alone, Chase."

He groaned.

"What's the point of wealth if you have no one to share it with."

"And there goes my rich-boy-fantasy."

"I'm serious," He turned to her, she'd had a faraway look in her eyes and a sadness that ran beyond the facts of the case.

“Whatever you’re getting sentimental about, cut it out. I mean it Olson. You’re not Blake Campbell, she died alone, your destinies aren’t fated so stop acting like it.” His tone was firm. “And point of correction, this house was nearly withdrawn by the mortgage bank it was sold on and the cars were for hire, her company went bankrupt after Mr. Campbell’s death and her son had to be withdrawn and put in public school. She didn’t live a life of wealth; she lived a lie. And she died in her lie.”

She could feel it. Her resolve crumbling, piece by piece, and she leaped to her feet. Detective Dawson remained unmoved on the couch; she didn’t bother with a response. She didn’t bother to acknowledge his words.

He’d watched, powerlessly as she strode out of the living room and vanished up the blood-stained grand stairway.

She needed to pull herself together and she didn't think she would be able to in the presence of Detective Dawson.

Running from him seemed to be her signature move. She'd done it enough times in one case. But she had demons to fight that this case was determined to resurrect.

Demons tied to her mother and her ex-boyfriend Mathew Rollins.

She would find a way to get out of whatever he had planned for later that day.

For now, she was apart from him and that would suffice.

The study where she'd joined Dan Harriet, Steve Woods, Lieutenant Wilson, and Sargent Garwood from the City P.D. was everything, she would imagine a luxury study to resemble. Timber danced across the walls and floors. In Rachel's opinion, the only thing that wasn't crafted from the bark of a tree had been the chairs.

Lieutenant Wilson who'd been in a light conversation with Garwood in the middle of the room approached Detective Olson. His face had been scrunched. Much like her, he didn't seem too pleased to be there.

"Detective Olson, it's been a while." Wilson reached out a flaky hand. Rachel took it in a firm shake. It had been much too long since she'd worked with Lieutenant Connelly Wilson. Not since Leona Wendy's case.

He'd been at the scene on the morning of the 9-1-1 call. The morning of Blake Campbell's murder. She hadn't lingered long enough to have a chat with the head of the City P.D.

"Indeed." She echoed with a dry smile.

He didn't look any different from the last time she'd seen him.

There was silence. He cleared his throat and gestured to Garwood. "The

Sergeant and I were just discussing a complete lack of witness interrogation on your end." She stiffened. "I've paid more than one visit to Pierce's Department and it's always the rookies that are in our witnesses face."

She didn't bother to rise to her own defense.

"I'm all about delegation of powers, Miss. Olson," Garwood said. Rachel shifted from one foot to the other, almost hoping for Detective Dawson to materialize and rescue her from his team with a witty comment. He always had one of those ready to save a situation. "But I can bet you have no idea who our witnesses are." That was wrong! Rachel knew the witnesses… In all honesty, she knew of them. At best, she knew them by the reports that had fallen on her desk. She knew them by imaging, she knew the statements they'd provided. "You can rely on employee accounts all you

want. But witnesses are a key element to any murder investigation."

Rachel strained to keep her features stoic, unreadable. This sure as hell wasn't the time for a scolding from a different department. She was doing the best she could despite the weight the case placed on her feeble shoulders. Didn't that count for anything?

It had to count. She straightened.

There, in Garwood's own words was the difference between the Sherriff's Department and the City P.D., there was a fine line of trust that ran between the staff. She could delegate her responsibilities and the rookies would handle it as if their jobs depended on it. The City P.D. couldn't.

Not that she was going to square shoulders with the Sargent.

"There's a woman, Ruby Lee Jones, founder Maids for Tillamook. She was at the scene minutes after the murder." At Garwood's words,

Rachel's interest was piqued, the pressure on her jaw loosened, she unclenched her fits. "Claims Campbell hired her to dust off the place."

"She's been questioned by our team, and your… rookies before." Connelly Wilson took over. "Said when she got here, the place didn't look like it had been lived in for months." So along with being a collector, the late Miss. Campbell had been a slob. Rachel didn't know what to feel about this. Reading too much into it and she could risk another sentimental outburst, something similar to what Dawson had endured. "We want you to rile her, get some answers from her."

"Fill in the blanks in her story." Garwood added.

"Think she could have pulled it off?" Her tone was creaky.

"No, but we think she could have seen or heard something." Wilson clarified.

“Something she’s trying so hard to forget.” Garwood reached into her pocket for her vibrating phone. “Garwood,” Her voice was firm.

“And you believe I have the moxie to get it out of her?” Rachel had her eyes on Lieutenant Connelly Wilson.

“We believe if you and Dawson were up against her, some new information might slip out.” Wilson’s eyes softened. “I know this is a lot. I know, this is still new to you,” His taut stance eased. He glanced at Garwood for a moment, she’d been leaned against the wall by the window, her phone pressed to her ear. He returned his attention to Detective Olson. “But space yourself, Olson. I know your working style. It’s going to kill you before your fourth murder case.”

She’d heard it before. Different versions of the same request from different voices. She was too invested in her case.

"Start small. Stop taking your work home with you, how about that," He reasoned.

She was hardheaded. She had to take her work with her. If she didn't, she wouldn't get half as much done.

With a steeled heart and an unmoved resolve, Rachel offered him a smile that didn't meet her eyes, nodded, and excused herself to meet Dan Harriet.

Dan had been occupied with taking books down from the shelf, flipping through them, and tossing them in a box that would be logged into evidence by Steve Woods.

"How's everything going in here?" She rippled their work pattern.

This was how she'd handled Leona Wendy's case. And she'd done a banging job. Anything less and she wouldn't hold the title of lead detective. And even if she did, she wouldn't feel as though she'd earned it.

“Not only was our deceased a collector of antiques, she must have also been passionate about Timber.” Steve Woods who’d been bagging the items Dan tossed in the box responded.

“No, her husband worked in Timber exportation.” Rachel corrected, slightly irked that days into the investigation and he hadn’t been properly briefed with the facts as the evidence technician.

“That was the case, but the documents we’ve bagged are recent publications.” Dan Harriet explained flipping through yet another book.

“Ooh,” She deliberated his words and spoke. “Perhaps her son kept collecting them even after his father’s passing.”

“Can’t you get in touch with him and ask? Dawson said you’ve got the guy on speed dial.” Her face blanched. What she’d done had been illegal. She’d gone through private records to get that number.

She swallowed the bile lodged in her throat.

"What else has Dawson told you about me," At her words, Steve Woods barked a laugh, one that earned him a slap on the forearm by Dan Harriet.

"I guess there's a lot being said about me during these after work circles at American Angel." She said more to herself than to the men in the room.

That was fine. They could discuss her behind her back. It didn't matter. Why then did her heartache? Why did her lips bobble, and her fingers tremble? Clenching her hands in a fist, she wandered through the room, determined to occupy her rattled nerves.

She wasn't good with people if her last relationship was any indication. Mathew hadn't just left her. He'd opened her eyes to the realization that no one would be able to tolerate her. No one would be able

to love a woman who saw only herself, heard only her own voice, and did things her way alone. Even when she'd tried to be inclusive her selfishness ran deeper than her conscious mind. And she'd asked him; if he'd known her actions were unconscious was that worth leaving?

He'd left anyway.

She ran her hands over a wall of drawers. The first few she'd drawn open had contained medical reports, ECG reports, test records. She'd brought out all she could and placed them on the desk Steve Woods had been leaned against. "You might want to get these on record." She called to Steve and pointed to the stack of papers and folders.

He pushed himself upright and approached them. "What are these?"

"Medical records, we can hand these over to forensics for interpretation."

"Sounds like a plan." He began bagging them and placing them away

in a box he turned and trudged over to the table. “Found anything on the phone yet?” Her stomach churned. She shook her head. “Because it’s been days and the Sherriff is getting curious.”

“I haven’t been able to bypass her passcode, and I was supposed to take it to a guy I know, but I haven’t… had the time.” She hadn’t gotten around to it.

“Let me handle it. I didn’t take a year in Computer engineering at MIT for nothing.” Confusion crossed her face. He saw it and explained further. “I saw it, hated it and ditched it, took up pre-law and this job seemed doable so, here I am.”

There was so much she didn’t know about her crew. She worked with them and yet seemed to overlook that they had lives much like her, pasts, families, and degrees. They didn’t just wake up one morning as Medical Examiners or Evidence Technicians. They fought for this job

as much as she strained for hers as lead Detective.

“Fine, Betty has it.” She paused then clarified, “My car, the white Lexus parked up front, it’s in the glove compartment beneath my car papers.” She reached into her pocket and handed him the keys. “How long will you need to crack the code?”

“I’ll get to it afterwork. I can get it to your desk by morning.”

She nodded. She was fine with that.

He was off without another word and she continued to unload drawers of medical reports until she’d come across multiple EEG scans and prescription papers.

She’d taken her time to go through them before adding to the growing pile of documents awaiting Steve Woods's return.

These reports were the answer to the question Detective Dawson had wedged Paul Campbell with.

Dawson had been bluffing that day in her office. He'd had a theory, improbable as it might have been, she'd allowed him to voice it. It hadn't gotten to the Sherriff, he would have hauled it over his shoulder, but it had gotten to Paul. Dawson had been of the impression that the late Mrs. Campbell had been crazy, loony enough to convince someone to stick a knife through her.

He hadn't been far off.

Blake Campbell had been diagnosed with Paranoid Schizophrenia confirmed by multiple healthcare centers around Tillamook.

A knock at her door had her head perking in that direction. Christian Lewis poked his head in. "You're late, again," He let himself in and shut the door. Confusion clouded her long face. The day wasn't over, and she'd already bitten off more than she could

chew. “Another briefing in the conference room,”

Regan groaned. “It’s the second one this week?”

She leaned back in her chair and took in the man by the door.

Christian Lewis wasn’t old per se. Going on fifty-five, he was as vigorous as the youths he worked with. He was a personal friend and colleague. As the Assistant Chief Deputy District Attorney, he was in simple terms a glorified secretary with a higher salary and bragging rights. He wasn’t too bad at his side hustle as her partner in crime. Just one of the fifteen-man personnel team she worked with.

“Tom has gone mad with power,” Christian Observed with a shrug. He’d had his hands in his pants pocket and stood with a hunch. At over six-foot it was barely noticeable.

Tom was the Chief Deputy District Attorney. He’d already rallied the team days ago to express his

disdain with the rise of crime in Tillamook. Regan Sinclair had loathed herself for not sitting that one out.

"And it seems like someone is getting laid off," Christian added.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a special guest among us," Christian said vaguely.

"I already have enough on my plate and no time for guessing games."

"Governor Bernard Sutter's already seated, and his appointed D.A. is not in attendance."

Color drained from her face.

"I'm… I was… Shit." She grasped at her words, the blood in her veins frigid. She blamed Julie… No, Lisa… She blamed Julie for putting Lisa in her path. Julie hadn't been able to shut up about her psychologist neighbor. She had mentioned Lisa in the past, passively, but never with the fervor of trying to play matchmaker. Regan dreaded it, whenever Julie did

that. It just meant she didn't have faith that Regan could find her Mrs. Right on her own. It wasn't as if she was trying… "I was in the middle of something," She gestured to her computer.

Christian rose an eyebrow and she waved him over.

He leaned over her shoulder and adjusted the medicated lenses he's worn as long as she'd known him.

She wasn't scatterbrained. She late for pop-up briefings. That wasn't like her. Her team was the textbook definition of unreliable. Not her. She was put together, collected, and all it took was a blind date tucked between the sheets of a contract to unravel the straight line that was her life?

No, she couldn't let that happen.

She was almost done with Lisa Patterson's contract. Much to her own dismay, she hadn't been able to finish it before Lisa had to return to the office. It was better that way. She

would have another reason to meet with the espresso skinned woman.

Did she want to meet with her outside the boundaries of the contract she was drawing up? She'd deliberated over it minutes into the woman's exit.

"Whoever this Patterson woman is, she's teetering on the edge, I've never seen so many exclusion clauses in a client-therapist contract," Christian observed taking his time to skim through the document.

She was rusty. Spending years out of the dating game would do that to a person. She had her reservations against women. Exclusively younger women.

"From what I gather, she thinks he did it. Working with him off the grid gives her time to break down his walls and not have to explain to some board of directors."

"You're not buying this are you?" Christian turned to her.

She acknowledged his familiar scent, he always seemed to smell unmistakably of ginger.

“And what if I am?” She wasn’t. She had her own reasons for keeping the woman nearby. Dancing around a serious affair, it wouldn’t hurt to dip her toes in the water. Get a feel of dating world.

“Bullshit.” He straightened and left her desk.

“What?” Regan closed the program and put her desktop to sleep.

“She’s barking up the wrong tree.” Christian was by the rack of wines and liquors. “You said it yourself, you have a killer in mind. I doubt you believed it was the prodigal son?” He picked up a glass.

It was true.

She had her own spin on what she supposed happened to Blake Campbell. That didn’t disregard the fact that Lisa Patterson was in direct contact with the son of the deceased. And she was going to take it as an

opportunity to have a woman on the inside. Someone who would dig and relay their findings to her. Someone other than her investigators down at the Sherriff's Department. Someone who would pry into the mind of the only other living Campbell.

"Should you be doing that?" She gestured to the bottle of white wine he was reaching for, desperate to change the subject.

"Don't let the hair fool you, I'm not that old, my dear." He spilled the content of the bottle into the glass.

She reached for her phone and keys and rose to her feet. He downed the content of the glass in one go. She resisted the urge to shake her head and pulled the door open for the both of them.

She knew the way to the much-despised conference hall on the third floor and she and Christopher had walked in silence down the halls to the elevators, the click and clack of

their shoes against the marble flooring filling the taut air.

Lisa Patterson was as good a starting point as any. It wasn't as if other women were ogling her the way Lisa had. Regan was a lot of things, but she wasn't blind. The woman had been flustered. It had been years since she'd had that effect on a woman… No, it had been years since she'd paid attention to the effect she had on a woman. Heat flooded her cheeks tinting them a rose hue.

At scorned thick mahogany double doors, she filled her lungs. She was green with envy. Relationships were ruined for her and she had no one else to blame besides Linda Wilde. She pushed the double-doors open. Behind it, she'd been welcomed by eyes, disapproving, curious, and tired eyes from familiar faces. There'd been one that sent a chill down her spine. Governor Bernard Sutter was distinctive. He had a way of dominating a room even by just

sitting there. He'd been at the farthest end of the room. The table he'd sat at was long enough to fit him and the executive team, with two remaining chairs that belonged to Regan Sinclair and Christian Lewis.

She picked up her pace and took the chair closest to Gabriel Ackerman, one of the two Deputy District Attorneys she'd worked alongside. He leaned towards her. "We get you're the D.A. and all but, some of us would like to not sit here with Tom all afternoon,"

She knew what an afternoon with the chatterbox Tom entailed. And she was deeply apologetic.

"I'm sorry," She mouthed.

Tom cleared his throat. "I've called you here to discuss one of two things." His voice boomed. "Before I delve into it, I would like to acknowledge a special man in our midst, Governor Bernard Sutter. We wouldn't be here without his wise decision to appoint us." All eyes

turned to the broad pot-bellied man at end of the table, and he rose a hand and offered a nod, pleased by Tom's introduction. "I'm sure by now we all know of the indiscretions of our D.A. Regan Sinclair?"

"This isn't because I was late to the meeting is it?" She glared at her colleague.

"That interruption aside, I don't know if you know this," He rose to his feet and begun to pace the room. "But you caused an uproar amongst the people of Tillamook by admitting that we the office of the District Attorney don't have an idea of who this killer could be," He stopped by a monitor in the front of the room and tapped the screen.

A news report played, and they'd watched in silence. Regan's stomach sank.

It was a press briefing, she'd been sincere. Days into the murder the people of Tillamook would be mad to expect a killer to be found. Indeed,

sorrow ran through the streets like a flood, she'd taken an oath in her position and she didn't have it in her to lie to the people of Tillamook.

Not that she'd voiced her defense in the presence of the Governor.

She'd been by a podium, her voice the previous day had been steady as spoke about the deceased Blake Campbell and expressed the efforts her office was making to get to the bottom of it. In the process, she'd let it slip that the office of the D.A. was scrambling for the killer.

Tom paused the video and turned to the table. "I'm opening up the table to a brief discussion."

Silence seemed to be in attendance as well.

"She should have kept that part out of it." The Office Manager, Caroline Parks shook her long head of blonde hair. Regan bothered a glance at her, the woman's blue eyes had been on the special guest.

“When was this anyway? I wasn’t informed of a press briefing,” Joshlyn Sears wanted to know. She was one of the firm's Legal Assistants.

“From the looks of things, neither was Regan.” Caroline answered expertly.

“The people are livid.” Tom ceased the attention once more. “They’re taking to the streets and protesting ‘Justice for Tillamook’s Grand Mother’, something we as an office are working on and ought to assure them that we have a handle on the situation.”

“It’s just protests.” Regan pitched helplessly.

“Protests are riots waiting to happen, Miss. Sinclair.” Bernard Sutter scolded.

She looked to Christian for help, he had his eyes fixed on the monitor.

She was all alone in this.

“Now I have men overlooking the situation, but D.A. Sinclair this is trying times for Tillamook and we

would rather have you not reek fear into our people while we try to find who killed the neighborhood sweet-old-lady." Tom continued.

She huffed.

"You called a meeting with the executive team and the Governor to tell me something you could have in my office?" She tilted her head. "You have gone mad with power." She said more to herself and once again was on her feet. "I'm sure our team," She gestured with her hand to the people at the table. "Have more pressing matters to attend to, rather than sit here all day while you exercise your power."

"Enough!" Bernard Sutter roared.

"If you'd bothered asking, D.A. Sinclair, Tom was acting under my orders to gather the executive team." Sutter took the floor, his hands smoothening down his suit. Fists clenched on either side, she returned to her seat. "He merely requested to have this discussion since we were all

gathered. As for why I called you all here, it's to discuss how soon we can shut this case down."

Her brows creased. Mumbles and muttering filled the air.

"I get the feeling shutting it down is going to cause more harm than good," Christian spoke up.

"It's a complete waste of resources, old ladies die all the time. We need to push this under the carpet. And it would have been an easier task had D.A. Sinclair not gone and stirred up trouble."

She'd had her own spin on what had happened to Blake Campbell. She'd heard about the poor woman's demise at the hands of a killer that had struck Tillamook once before and gotten away with it. A killer whose position made it that much harder to get caught.

Regan Sinclair was convinced, this killer was a certain pot-bellied Governor, Bernard Sutter.

The unemployment rumors ceased. The bitter glares from colleagues were nowhere to be found. Annabelle Dawson didn't saunter into work in her best pair of heels, no. She'd bought herself a new pair, Saint Lauren leather pumps. The ones she'd been eyeing on her way home, the pair she'd never been able to afford.

Her breakfast treat had been a croissant filled with chocolate from the new overpriced breakfast bar on 4th.

The tears that had run down her rose cheeks when she'd glanced at the ratings at home the previous night were natural, raw. Not only had their ratings skyrocketed, it was neck and neck with Lucy Wilken's Channel Nine News. Annabelle Dawson had done it. She'd climbed the career

ladder. But she couldn't stop there. This was only the beginning.

She wasn't going to lose her job. She'd been taken off probation, though Simon Neil still threatened to have his eyes on her. It was after all, her lack of initiative that almost cost her a career in journalism.

She wasn't going to let that happen. Not again. She still had a lot to prove to Simon Neil and she was going to stop at nothing to ensure he saw her determination and zeal. She was going to demonstrate her skill and creativity with her documentary on Blake Campbell.

And despite threatening to watch her like a hawk, Simon Neil had invited her to a gala hosted in celebration of the climbing ratings. From what she'd heard it was an exclusive gathering on 7th Street by Laurel Avenue over the weekend. Neil had requested she bring whoever she wanted and she'd invited Amanda and Chase… he could finally

introduce her to the Detective he was always going on and on about.

The viewers had slurped up the last story, the one with the dead lead. Simon wanted more of that, he wanted to give the viewers everything they asked. He wanted a group interview. Anyone they could get from the party Richard Dean had taken Blake to. He'd tossed the idea to Annabelle in the dead the night. And even though she'd been tempted to slip back into a slumber, she'd pulled another all-nighter and she'd gotten her band of Amanda and Frank back together, and the three of them had tugged on whatever strings available and secured an interview at what was now an event center on Elm Avenue with Josephine Dean, the youngest sibling of the deceased Richard Dean and Mark Flint, a colleague of Richard Dean. They'd both been at the party with Blake

Campbell. They both had a perspective.

The camera already rolling, she and Amanda had been seated on foldable metal chairs provided by the event center, on a stage in what was once a ball room in a privately owned home, now a theater.

"Blake Campbell was already dressed for the occasion. I didn't speak to her that night, but I'd seen her. Everyone had, she was the type of woman that was noticed when she walked into a room."

Her chest had swollen with pride as she'd stepped into the gold and white ball room; a chandelier lit foyer, tables and chairs pushed to the walls, and a grand-stairway spilling into the middle of the room. Despite not having the latest Valentino mini, she sure as hell had an expensive alternative curtesy of Christopher

Campbell's lavish spending before, he'd passed on.

An Amuage pencil midi with a deep plunging neckline paired with a shimmering pearl necklace—an anniversary gift—and Armani pumps that clicked and clacked above the white-chocolate marble floors, she'd fit right in with the skimpily, yet gracefully clothed women that had their chins in their air and breasts at eye level. Smooth jazz filled her ears, her matte-red lips curled into a faint smile. The party had been an invite only event, a bit absurd for a charity banquet, but she hadn't questioned it.

Christopher had taught her to question little in events like this. She didn't have any business sticking her nose where it didn't belong and she'd made an effort to keep it out of it.

Josephine Dean who'd had her eyes on Blake Campbell however, knew it was more than just a banquet. It was always more than what it seemed at events of this caliber.

She'd let her date, suited appropriately for the night, lead her around the grand foyer. She had to admit; she hadn't expected to be hauled back into this world. Christopher's world. A world she was all too used to. A universe where expensive parties were a normal occurrence in Christopher's life and as his wife it was mandatory that she accompany him. If it wasn't a charity banquet it was a company gathering. She didn't have to do anything at those parties, looking breathtaking and lingering by Christopher's side had always been enough. She hadn't been prepared to return to riding in the best cars… when the dirt had covered his coffin, Paul's hand in hers, she'd been convinced that was the end of their lavish lifestyle. Richard promised her everything Christopher had introduced her to and more!

With his hand on the small of her back, she took in the glimmer in his

glacial blue eyes and the smile on his thin pink lips beneath the snow-white hair that wrapped his chin and ran up atop his lips. It had intrigued her since they'd met at the bar.

"Son, when were you going to introduce me to your…plus one?" An authoritative, clipped voice asked. It belonged to a lean woman whose hair and glacial-blue eyes were a carbon copy of Richards'. She was however, older, in her mid-fifties perhaps with defined smile lines and crinkles around her eyes and corners of her nose.

Richard chuckled sightly.

"This is Blake Camp—"

"Slaughter," Blake corrected. The woman's head tilted.

Josephine with a champaign glass in her hands had inched closer to her brother and mother.

"I know you," Blake drew her bottom lip between her teeth. Why did that crack open a door to a bitter dread. She'd been recognized many

times before. Never once by people she cared about…

Did she care about the Deans? Sure, they were a ticket to a world she missed, to a lifestyle she would surrender if they didn't accept her. Did that mean she cared about their opinion of her?

"You're that—"

"Mom, how about we let Miss. Slaughter enjoy her night." Richard rose to her defense.

"Well, I have other guests to attend to, and son…" She drew him away from Blake and irrespective of the fact that she hadn't heard what the fifty-something-year-old woman had whispered in her son's ear, she had a good enough idea that it involved getting her out of that party.

How could Blake have thought she would be accepted back into this world?

She was dreaded the last time she was in it, clinging to a man that could have been her father. A little girl with

a man like that, in a town as small as Tillamook. She was never going to fit in.

"I'm sorry about her, she can be a handful." He'd taken her hand in his and brought it to his lips. Her eyes fluttered shut for a splinter of a second and she allowed her muscles to ease.

No one ever said this was going to be easy…

Her eyes snapped open.

"It's okay, not many people in this town actually like me," She hadn't been looking at him, but at the clustered bodies that spun and danced the night away. That had never been her, jutting her hips and kicking her legs in the air as if no one was watching. There was always someone watching…

"And does that bother you?" There was a sincere curiosity in his voice.

"It shouldn't should it?"

He shook his head. “Not in the slightest.”

His hand returned to her back. “Now, I promised to help you market your *business*, and it’s about time I keep up my end of the bargain.” She grinned even though the tightness in her stomach hadn’t reduced in the slightest.

The first man he’d lead her to, was a large man, indeed much like Christopher, he was tall and doughy in the middle, he’d had a rough salt and pepper beard and sharp blue eyes that she didn’t trust. “And who is this beauty, you’re with?” He’d slurred. Men like this, Christopher would scowl at. At the time, she’d urged him to ease his taut muscles… he’d been protecting her. How hadn’t she seen it before? And how was the large doughy man drunk already? The party had just begun!

She’d expected Richard Dean speak of her in high esteem, to

introduce her as Tillamook's most influential businesswoman. He hadn't.

That night, Richard Dean had walked her around the gathering, beneath the chandelier lit room and introduced her as a woman of the night, one in dire need of *business*.

"And that's when I saw her," Mark Flint said. He was an elderly man with salt and pepper hair and almond eyes. He'd been in his early forties at the time of the party. He'd accompanied a friend to the gathering, a doughy man much older than he was at the time. The man Leslie Gilstrap had been returning from a night of downing one too many beers when he'd stopped by the Dean's banquet.

Mark knew the woman in his presence. He'd expected Richard Dean speak of her in high esteem, to introduce her as Tillamook's most influential businesswoman. He hadn't.

That night, Richard Dean had introduced her as a woman of the night, a slut.

CHAPTER FIVE

Claire Fisher was gone. By the time Paul had returned to their hotel

room, the door and been locked and rasping against it for minutes on end had gotten him nowhere.

He'd tried despite the wandering eyes it attracted. He'd pleaded against the door to no one, clinging to the shred of hope that his wife-to-be hadn't taken to Tillamook's streets.

What would she have hoped to gain embarking on a one-woman search party anyway? She would have better luck remaining in their temporary residence until he returned.

She was gone.

She should have waited.

Waited while he cheated on her.

While he threw away the years they'd spent building the foundation of a relationship he wrecked in a morning of bad decisions.

But there was no way Claire could have pieced together what he'd done. He was safe in that regard.

For how long?

How long before the guilt suffocated him, how long before he

came clean or grew careless enough for her to piece together his wrongs?

He was safe for now. That didn't disregard the fact that he'd ignored her, abandoned her in an unfamiliar hotel room in a town she knew nothing about.

One last time, he slammed his fist against the door.

Claire wasn't at the other end of that door.

He needed to make it up to her.

Not for cheating. She didn't know about that, so he had nothing to make up for.

He needed to find her.

She meant too much to him, he couldn't lose her. Not this way. Not now.

His heart thundering in his chest, he made his way to the lobby and again under the scrutinizing gaze of the sun. He could run from his demons all he wanted, but he could only run from the sun for so long

before it would return and with it the guilt that piggybacked.

He was back in the Sienna they'd hired.

Dialing her number was useless. It went straight to voicemail.

Overlooking the fact that he'd run her perhaps out of town, he'd deserved a pat on the back for persuading the Claire Fisher to be his plus-one during this conundrum. Not many had the balls to attempt, not many could achieve such.

Looking back, he should have valued that. She was with him, and he'd taken that for granted.

He despised the possibility that she could be halfway to Portland by now. Their flight had been about fifteen minutes. Who was he kidding, she was probably back in their home; her home that she'd let him—a deadbeat who couldn't hold a job longer than a few months—move into. She was probably chucking his things out the window.

He groaned, filling the tight Sienna air with all the reasons why she was too good for him. His mother was right. He would learn a lot from her, she had a stable job, even though Blake hadn't approved of the pay, she'd wanted him to pick up a thing or two from Claire.

He was trembling. He couldn't drive. Neither could he remain in their Sienna, a 2018 model that had enough room for three kids. They didn't have kids, neither were they ready for that part of life, but the Sienna just seemed like the right car for them.

Again, he tried her number, voicemail.

He'd hurt his wife, he had to man up and take control of the goddamn situation. He'd ignored her calls and texts, pushed her away, and banged some blonde bartender that was anything but his type.

Coming clean was out of the question and remaining in a hotel parking lot wasn't an alternative.

Fumbling, Paul clicked the car to life and set on a journey to Portland, a journey to win back the love of his life. A journey to bury a mistake that should have never happened in the first place.

The drive was there about an hour and a half if he turned right at the 1st cross street onto the OR-6 E. He hadn't. Thirty-minutes in however, he'd pulled up at a run-down gas station for a refill for the Sienna that had been running on empty. The area was sketchy enough that he'd begun contemplating the risk of leaving the car out there in the sun and making his way into the convenient store to request a full-tank of gas. He was the only one for miles. He wasn't in a rush to get back on the open road. He didn't appreciate the silence he'd sat through, his hands turning white on the steering wheel as pangs of guilt stabbed him. Four-years building a relationship based on trust and love…

How could he have thrown it all away on a one-night-stand with a bartender that wasn't even his type? He didn't take pleasure in the tightness in his chest or the anger he felt towards himself for giving into his lustful desires. He was a horrible husband-to-be. He couldn't imagine how she was going to take it… Would she cry? Would she hit him? Claire was fierce despite her size. Her students shuddered at the sight of a scowl on her pretty face.

He'd never done anything to warrant more than the silent treatment or a smack in the arm. He'd never once been disloyal. He wasn't that kind of man.

"Then why did you do it?" His head snapped in the direction of the familiar voice. The soft, brittle voice he'd associated with love, home… She wasn't in the passenger seat. No, she'd been at the back. She'd been buckled in, eyes reddened, swollen, thin lips wobbling. His breath got

caught in his throat. He shook his head. This couldn't be happening. What was she doing there? Had she always been in there? Wouldn't she have suffocated with the windows rolled up all the while he was banging on their room door? She wasn't at the hotel; she wasn't anywhere to be found and she couldn't have crawled into the car… could she? His heart galloped in his chest; his fingers quivered. Did she hear everything he'd wailed into the silence?

He felt backed up into a corner. He was nervous, agitated. "What the fuck are you doing here Claire?" He barked slamming his hands on the steering wheel. She didn't as much as wince at the sudden sound. Where the hell did she come from? As far as he was concerned, she was supposed to be in Portland burning his things in their front yard—in her front yard—and swearing against men entirely.

She wasn't supposed to be in the back listening to his regret rip him apart, bit by bit.

"Wow, what a way to acknowledge the woman you cheated on." There was a cynical edge in her words.

He was suddenly claustrophobic. He squeezed his eyes shut. This had to be a trick, his mind was playing him.

There was a click and ruffling, and then he felt it. The petite hand placed on his back, almost at his shoulder, and that's when the first tear drop slid down his flustered cheek. His eyes fluttered open. "I'm so sorry." He couldn't bear losing her. He couldn't stop the stream, they came as if at last, he'd cracked open the door to the pain he'd been running from. He'd sobbed as though surrendering to the pain he'd caused her. "I'm so bloody sorry, Claire…" He turned to her. Lips pressed in a thin line, and eyes searching his,

she'd said nothing and let him pour out his anguish. "I… You probably heard what I was screaming about…" But she said nothing. "I wish it didn't happen… I wish…" Wishing did nothing, he needed to beg, he needed to grovel shamelessly. He needed to show her that the blonde bimbo at American Angels meant nothing. She was an impulsive decision he ought to have fought. She was a mistake.

"You could have stopped it, you could have respected me, you could have come back…" Each word was a dagger shoved through his tender flesh. "I waited, Paul. But you never came back for me." She shook her head, her hand falling limp at her side. No, he yearned for her touch, for her forgiveness. How was he going to get it? He felt lost.

"I wanted to make this right. I was going all the way to Portland to—"

"To apologize? You weren't even going to tell me what the hell you did." She returned to her seat. How

did she know that? He swallowed with much difficulty. “You were going to lie to me, going to bring me flowers and chocolates and you were going to act as if I was stupid. Am I stupid, Paul?” He couldn’t answer. “Am I?” He’d cried as if his soul was bleeding.

“I never wanted to hurt you, Claire… I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.” She didn’t want to hear it. Gliding the back door open, Claire let herself out and wandered into the convenient store.

Lurching forward, only to be tugged back by his seatbelt, Paul let himself out of the Sienna and stumbled over his own two feet. “Wait.” He called after her, but she’d vanished through the doors. “For gods sakes, Claire, wait.” He barged through the translucent convenient store doors. His eyes ran through the metal racks there were at least six rows she could have disappeared through. He didn’t need this.

“Where is she?” He blared, cheeks reddened from the ache in his chest and the frustration of dealing with a disgruntled fiancé.

The man with shaggy blonde hair and an unkept beard behind the counter frowned at him. “Who?” Paul knew his types, tattooed and careless, that’s why the man was stuck behind a counter for less than minimum wage.

“Are you dumb?” Paul edged closer to the man. “The woman that just walked in here.”

The man chuckled slightly. “Dude, no one’s been in here all day.” It was his turn to frown.

This couldn’t be happening.

He had to get to Portland.

Melissa Campbell, more appropriately Melissa Archer hadn’t left Tillamook. And Claire Fisher had been up—in a bid to shut the door on her anxiety—researching into the first wife of the late Christopher Campbell.

Melissa had moved from the Campbell home that was later occupied by Blake Campbell—only four years after her unofficial spit with Christopher Campbell—and into a smaller, cost-friendly apartment by Champions Park.

It was a single building, four stories, and Claire had let herself in through the front door above which hung an exhausted sign that said entrance.

There was no one by the front desk. There seemed to be no one around. “Hello!” She called, guiding herself through the parted doors. One lead to an empty bathroom, another to a breakroom equipped with a coffee maker that had a stale brew sitting in the pot, a cup in the sink, and a chair pulled out from the single table.

Someone had been here.

She returned to the front desk. “Hello!” She called again. This time, glancing at the stairs and listening for footsteps.

She knew this was where Melissa Campbell lived. She just needed to know what room and what floor.

With her heart lurched, suspended, she'd glanced over her shoulder twice as if someone would appear behind her, and when no one did, she wondered behind the desk for a registry. A document of rooms and numbers and owners. Anything that would point her in the direction of the first wife of Christopher Campbell.

It was on the surface of the desk, shut below a copy of Know My Name by Channel Miller. She'd pushed the memoir aside and flipped through the registry, taking time to glance up at the door. Her hands had begun to tremble.

She'd found it the name, Melissa Archer, room—

The door flung open, and Claire Fisher stood frozen in place. She couldn't go to prison for trespassing. She had an LL.B.; She was the Criminal Law Professor at the

University of Portland. People like that didn't belong in a prison cell, didn't belong on trial. The hairs at the nape of her neck perked.

The woman who'd pushed the door open had been occupied with a phone between her shoulder and ear and arms hugging bags of groceries.

Claire had vanished up the stairs. Taken them two at a time, her bag slapping against her hip until she'd reached the third floor. The fifth door. Room 305. She knocked and waited, shifting her weight between her feet. They were killing her. She'd walked half the way into the streets from her and Paul's hotel.

She hadn't had a destination at the time. Her head had hung low, eyes fixed on articles that filled her phone screen. She'd set out to find Melissa Campbell. And only one website made mention of the fact that she'd taken up a cozy life out of the media's scrutinizing gaze as a teacher in an elementary school in the area and

resided by Champions Park. Claire had leaped into a cab upon reading that.

The articles had claimed Melissa was younger than her husband at the time they'd wed. The gap wasn't as drastic as that of Blake Campbell, but it was noticeable, and the people of Tillamook had pecked at it like birds to crumbs.

The door cracked, half-closed.

The woman's eyes at the other end was ablaze.

But familiar.

She was the woman in the article.

The woman from all the pictures.

"What do you want?" Her voice had been scratchy.

Claire Fisher forced a smile. "I'm Private Investigator… Piper Holiday," The lie was easy on her tongue. "… and I would like to have a quick chat with you about the death of Blake Campbell." The door shut in her face. Hope wasn't lost because she'd heard the bolts on the other end being

undone and the door opened. She slipped into the woman's home.

Lilacs. The woman's home had smelled immediately of it.

It was a small apartment. Peach and pink, brought to life by flowers that hung on the wall over bookshelves. There was a small television in the corner, a mug on the wooden coffee table by the floral armchair, and books scattered on the chair.

It seems Melissa had been in the middle of reading time. Claire reached for one of the books. The one with the pages opened to the ceiling. Finding Freedom by Erin French.

She returned it to the patterned… textured chair. "I didn't kill her." Melissa said joining her in the living room.

"I never said you did." Claire clung to her cotton sweater and took in the woman. She was old. She couldn't for the life of her guess how old at this point, but the woman's hair

was salt; grey as a pending storm, and she had empty eyes to match, a steel grey. The lips on the woman were chapped, pencil-thin, and faded pink. She was rather full-figured and short with skin of warm honey. “Restless is the guilty mind.” Claire said more to herself. “You didn’t kill her so there’s nothing you should be… worried about.” She reached for her cross bag that sat on her hip and pulled out one of her many printouts. “I just want to get to know a little more about, Blake Campbell from you,” She paused handing it to the woman who scowled, forehead creased, and mouth set in a hard line. “After all, you are her late husband’s legal wife.”

“Ready?” Detective Dawson poked his head into her office. He ran his eyes over the room and made a show of being intrigued by the room. “It’s good to be back in here. I knew you’d come groveling for me to come

back, but I didn't think it would be this soon,"

Rachel Olson shut the report Steve Woods had left on her desk. He'd been able to crack the passcode. Embarrassingly, she couldn't guess the password of a fifty-something-year-old woman. She hadn't had the time to go through his findings. She resisted the urge to shove the file into her bag. She was out of time. The thought of leaving behind the content of their deceased's phone in her office had an idle hand tugging at her earlobe.

This wasn't going to be easy.

Nothing has ever been easy since she'd joined the force.

"I didn't grovel," She heard herself say in a squeak of a voice. Pulling open her desk drawer, she shoved the report inside and slammed it shut.

"Woah, Olson, Everything okay?" Dawson yet again had this scruffy

end-of-the-day look to him. She let out a harsh breath.

She couldn't explain her mood. Not to him. Not after the character's she'd exhibited in his presence, not after her weakness and complete lack of emotional control, not after he'd seen her sink her career because she couldn't take a goddamn hint, watched her push everyone away.

And even still, he stuck around.

He was like that annoying neighborhood cat that despite being shooed multiple times returned and for the littlest bit of attention. She wasn't going to admit it, but she was getting used to that cat.

"I'm fine." She met his gaze, he was by the entrance, hands in the pockets of his slacks, his shirt untucked, and sleeves of course rolled up exposing his forearms. She was easing into the look, only Detective Dawson could pull off the gruff, unemployed look. "Shall we?" She

rose, reached for her bag on the desk, and rounded her table to him.

He hadn't moved an inch.

She paused. His eyes burned; she hadn't been ready to meet them. She'd kept hers on the door behind him and listened to the music of his breathing. "You don't have to do this, Olson."

She shook her head. If she didn't, she would return home and without work, she didn't know what she would do with the leftover time she had on her hands. Detective Dawson was offering her an alternative. Something to yank her out of her shell, and maybe one day she can return to American Angels and sit with the Crime Scene Unit.

This was the first step. "I want to." She did it. She dared a look into his welcoming eyes. It was fascinating how he could be the same bad cop that had sent Paul Campbell into hysterics and the man with the soft-welcoming-eyes at the same time.

“This is what’s best for me,” There it was, for her. She could hear it now. She was self-involved. In all her cases, she put herself in the victim’s shoes, made it all about her, and how she had to avenge Leona, and with Blake Campbell, history was repeating itself.

Again, and again because, her mother might have been buried, but the night of her passing still hungover Rachel Olson like a dark cloud.

Mathew had pointed this out, time and time again, and she’d pushed him away every time. Until one day, he’d had enough, he’d left her, and she never recovered from it.

That was until Detective Dawson. The husky, quick-witted bad cop that weaseled his way into her life and didn’t seem like he had an exit strategy planned for when the book is closed on the case.

“That’s what’s best,” She corrected and broke free of his concerned stare and headed for the

door. “I’m okay leaving my car here for the night, we can take yours, right?”

“Yeah, it’s out front, the, erm… black Yukon,” He waved a hand towards the door.

She was quick on her feet, not particularly sure what she was running from, the rapidly approaching night, or her unrequited feelings for her work partner.

Much like what she’d felt for her flings post-divorce, it would burn out. This meant nothing, not even enough to work him up over.

Gertrude had waved to a retreating Rachel Olson and continued shutting the lights at the reception.

The evening breeze caressed her skin, and she drew to a stop. How long could she keep it up? How much longer could she outrun everyone that showed her the slightest bit of human decency?

Mathew had painted her as a monster because of her flaws. Was that enough to run from the world?

She heard a click, her eyes fluttered open, a light had been retreating.

Footsteps and a familiar scent whipped past her. Detective Dawson had been pulling open the passenger door. She climbed into the clean GMC Yukon SUV, eased by how much like Dawson the car smelled. The door clicked shut and he jogged around to the driver's seat, letting himself in.

"I'm surprised you could find something we could do in the evening… it's not drinking, is it?" She eyed him skeptically.

He barked out a laugh. "No, it's not drinking." He made his way out of the precinct's parking and onto the street. "It's something we can both benefit from."

That said he began heading down a route she knew all too well.

A route she hadn't been to since her mother's funeral.

A silence settled in and she'd had her head turned to the window. They'd just driven past an Ups Customer Care Center when she relaxed into the leather seats.

Detective Dawson wasn't Mathew Rollins. He wasn't going to dig up her flaws and leave her. He wasn't going to trap her in a bubble of her own errors. No, Dawson wanted to help her, for reasons beknown to her, he wanted to tug her from the shell Mathew had forced her into. And she didn't know whether to follow him or run for the hills.

She didn't run. Not yet.

Cape Lookout State Park on Whiskey Creek Road, what was once her favorite retreat as a sixteen-year-old. She looked at him as he pulled the car to a stop.

"The beach,"

“You need to relax, Olson, and what better way than a walk on the sand,”

“I don’t have beach shoes.”

“I’ve got flip-flops in the trunk.”

“I’m in a pantsuit.” He bothered a glance at her from behind the wheel.

“Roll up your pant legs.” He opened his door and slipped out into the night.

She considered his words. This wasn’t a cheap suit! People don’t roll up the pant legs of a Givenchy pantsuit. Sure, it had left a noticeable dent in her account, but anyone would risk it to be seen out and about strutting in a raven black pantsuit. It had been a spur-of-the-moment splurge days after her salary had settled in, but it had been damn worth it in her opinion.

Nothing better to do, she joined him by the trunk. He’d already rolled up the legs of his slacks and was slipping off his loafers for a pair of black flip-flops. “I’m not going to

wait for you. Act like a princess all you want, I'm heading down there, and you can join me if it suits you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of something; cigarettes.

"No wonder your voice sounds like cat-claws against a black-board," She nodded to the stick he placed between his lips. The packet was back in his pocket.

"Ouch," He placed a hand on his chest. "And it's chilly, out,"

"So, here's an idea, we don't come to the beach in the middle of Autumn?"

"This doing more good than harm, and as much as I love the trunk of my car, I would rather be by the shores." He said, not moving from the back of his car. His expression was closed up, cold. She'd seen it before, never directed at her… he'd used it during interrogations when he had to be the feared cop over her shoulder. It had been a constant in the Leona Wendy

case. How could she have forgotten it?

She reached for a pair of flip-flops, forcing the thoughts out of her head, and begun rolling up the legs of her pantsuit—and resisting the urge to groan—when the strain of tobacco hit her nostrils. She bit back the impulse to explode in a coughing fit. It had laced the air at American Angels… she'd never pegged him as a smoker.

It was a turn-off.

"Can you please not do that?" He shrugged and led the way down the path by the trees.

And now he wasn't listening.

This was turning out to be more stressful than the day she'd had. How had he changed all of a sudden?

This was going to give her whiplash.

She'd hopped from one evil to another. From having her job whirling about in her head to having her feelings for Detective Dawson crawl

their way out of the box they were supposed to be locked in.

This wasn't the time to acknowledge whether or not his countenance towards her had changed.

This was supposed to be a chance for her to ease up her tense nerves. A chance to make the separation from her job and her personal life.

He was much tall than her, and it added to his stride. She was noticeably slower. She wasn't bothered. It gave her time to take in the familiar sceneries of Cape Lookout.

Her mother, Cecilia Jackson-Brown—after the divorce—had adored the cape lookout trail. There were days Rachel and Cecilia would camp out for days at a time and hike, she especially loved heading south to the cave and tidepools.

Detective Dawson had paused in the sand, the burning stick between his fingers and head was thrown back.

His shirt hung loose against his frame. He'd completely undone the buttons at this point, in the breeze, the cotton material flapped at his sides, he barely took notice of it. If things were different, if they weren't work partners, she would have allowed herself the luxury of drooling for the man with the chiseled torso.

But things weren't different. And an affair would only complicate things.

"Eyes at the stars, Olson, not at me." She didn't turn away, not this time.

He was the one to look at her, beneath the evening glare with the wind whipping at her hair that had escaped the bun she'd ceremoniously pulled it into before work. The curls were violent against her cheek, her eyes were slits in the breeze.

Tossing the burning stick into the sand, he took a step closer, just enough that he could run his hands through her hair. It was soft, and the

curls like a baby's hand wrapped around his fingers.

Her breath was warm, he could feel it against his chest from where his buttons had been opened after a long day at his desk.

Her thick curly hair was long enough for a single braid down to the middle of her back. A technique he'd learned a while back.

Hands pressed on her shoulders, he turned her around and took her hair in his hands again, this time, parting it and braiding it back until it fell just at the middle of her back. She ran a hand over his work. It had been a while since he'd worked in hairstyling for some extra cash, but it would do.

"Now come on, I know a great spot not too far from here." His face went blank.

She followed, wondering why in hell he'd thought to bring her to the one place that reminded her most of her dead mother.

“I tried. I did everything you asked… the umm… cognitive therapy… thing, it’s not working,” Jessica Stanford a sixteen-year-old mother who was not only dealing with post-partum depression, but persistent Depressive Disorder said, her thin unruly brows knitted as tears shone in her glossy blue-green eyes.

Lisa eyed the car seat by the open door. Jessica always opted for an open-door session. Oftentimes she would watch the nurses dart by, enthralled by the everyday affairs of the private mental institution. The infant in the beaten-up-hand-me-down-car seat, yet to be named by the single mother had been barely clothed, she had a diaper on, and a hat over her small pink head. “You drove here by yourself?”

Jessica Stanford followed Lisa’s eyes. “Yes.” Her eyes leaped away from her child. Almost as if she couldn’t stand the sight. Lisa could.

Where Jessica Stanford saw an underfed unkept baby, Lisa saw a child with a mother exploring the downs of motherhood.

Postpartum Depression wasn't uncommon in new mothers, and especially single mothers and Lisa Patterson had handled one too many patients suffering from it. Her other patients weren't in their teenage years and didn't struggle as much as Miss. Stanford, but Lisa understood a chunk of it was attributed to dropping out of high school to undergo a psychiatric treatment that once again did more harm than good.

"Can you tell me in detail, what you tried?" A tear slid down the girl's rosy plump cheeks.

"Every damned thing, journaling, changing my thinking patterns… she's been wearing that diaper since yesterday… she has a rash I don't know what to do about and I don't fucking want her." There was a crack in the girl's voice.

This wasn't the first time Lisa had met with Jessica.

This wasn't the first time Jessica had pleaded with Lisa to take custody of her newborn daughter.

That wasn't how parenting worked. That wasn't how adulting worked. She couldn't just hand over her responsibilities.

If that were the case, Lisa wouldn't have endured sitting through two separate sessions supervising the new trainee Psychologists Samantha Galbraith and Nick Marsons. The hospital in a bid to expand had sought to take in two new rookies in her field, rookies she was instructed to guide—without extra pay since the board of directors had shrugged of her pitch for a raise.

"But you don't want to give her up to an adoption agency," Lisa clicked her fingers on her keyboard. She dragged her mouse against the surface of her desk and put out a request for her colleague Dr. Thomas

Weaver, the hospitals on ground Psychiatrist.

She hadn't done it to push the girl back on medication. No, she'd done it to get a second pair of eyes. She and Dr. Weaver had an understanding. He knew Lisa's patents weren't to be medicated, but he could advise her on the girl's behavioral patterns.

"No, I grew up from foster care. It's shit, I want her to have a good home." Jessica had been staring at the man by the door, he hadn't knocked, nor had he poked his head in. Lisa tried on a smile.

"You care." Lisa observed. Her patient for over a month turned her attention to her newborn.

"I don't want her to go through what I went through…"

"She's not going to."

"And how do you know?" Jessica Stanford balled her fists.

"What you're going through, Miss. Stanford, is anxiety, a normal symptom of depression and PPD."

“You know how I feel about medical bullshit,” Lisa tensed her shoulders, agitated by her patient's choice of words. She bit her lips on the choice words that clung.

“What I’m trying to say, is you’re already a great mother, she’s alive isn’t she?”

Jessica sat in silence, once more focused on the man at the other end of the open door, the man Lisa was yet to acknowledge.

At this time of the night when the hospital was about closing a frantic man, standing in place, naked fear evident on his face didn’t particularly sit right, especially to the new mother who’d gone into fight or flight mode.

The silence didn’t last long enough for Lia to get her thought out.

“That doesn’t mean I’m a good fit for her.”

Lisa shook her head and scribbled down something on the notepad open before her. “And you think I would be,”

"You have a job, you're organized… please, don't let me go home with her, I don't know what I would do…"

Lisa glanced at her iMac.

"I can't take your baby." Lisa hadn't once considered Jessica's offer. It wasn't born through a sincere heart but through a broken mind. I can transfer you to, Dr. Thomas Weaver. He isn't on seat today, but if you can come in first thing tomorrow morning."

"Are you sure he's not around?" The man at the door had become frantic and two nurses had appeared on either side of him.

Lisa tilted her head, from where she sat, her patient was staring at the infant in the car seat.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

She ripped out the paper she'd scribbled in and handed it to Jessica Stanford. It had taken a moment of waving the pink paper in front of her

patient to get a response, but when she had, she'd been relieved to conclude another session.

As Jessica rose from her seat and began towards the car seat, Lisa reached for her schedule for the following day. She'd had a rough enough day, and before carpooling with Julie, she wanted to wrap her head around what the following day had in store for her. Not only did she have a meeting with the board of directors to discuss the future of her new trainees, she as well had to relay a report of the progress or lack thereof in her clients of the week to her supervisor Caroline O'Brien.

Lisa's afternoon was unoccupied due to a cancellation—

A knock at her open door had her head jerking in that direction. With a racing pulse, she acknowledged the man at the other end of the door. She couldn't take any more clients, why hadn't Bridget sent him back?

No…

she needed to get home. One more late night and she was sure her body was going to give in to the strain it was under.

Ludacris enough as it was… it wasn't the first time she'd slaved over a desk nine-to-nine. She still felt it, the weakness that taunted her at night, the numbness that held her down in the darkness of her room. She couldn't ignore it.

The man who poked his head in had her breath hitching in her throat. She was hardly ever skittish. But he had this effect on her. One that had adrenaline leaching and her mind, running. A voice in her head whispered the words killer.

He knew the home all too well. He knew how he could get in without being noticed and how long it would take him to return to Portland before the body was found, he knew the stairs, the master bedroom…

She hadn't been expecting him for a week. She hadn't even heard back

from Regan Sinclair about the contract.

Paul Campbell was frantic when he let himself into her office. His hair was a disheveled mess, his shirt had visible sweat stains and wrinkles. This was the son of a family that once nestled at the breast of wealth. She was tempted to shake her head.

“Mr. Campbell, I wasn’t expecting you, and not especially this late,” She pointed out.

He’d glared at her, his face scrunched, and nose crinkled as if she reeked. She didn’t, she’d made an effort to ensure her office smelled as nicely as she did.

His mouth curved into a macabre smile, one that was gone as quickly as it appeared as color drained out of his face. “We got into a fight.” He said more to himself. His words hadn’t been intended for anyone. He hadn’t been looking at her and in his blue-green eyes was a demented look. One she knew all too well from a former

patient of hers. One she didn't want to be left alone with.

Bad things happened when she was alone with patients like this. Things she didn't want resurfacing. Things that tested her dedication to the role of senior Counselling Psychologist for the Tillamook Wellness Center.

She was torn; at a crossroad. She was inclined to flee, to save herself, reach for the desk phone, and call for help. In the worst case, scream and cry, the door was still ajar. She would be abandoning her desires to prove his involvement in his mother's case.

She couldn't leave.

She had to convince herself and the rest of Tillamook what he'd done.

People like him didn't deserve to get away with his actions even if he was affected. Her death had an impact on him. Gruesome deaths had a way of tampering with a person's mental health.

Murders did as well.

She was the only one in her department that believed he could have done it. Everyone else was listening to Stuart Middleton. He'd filled their heads with conspiracies. She had a theory, one she had to prove for the sake of the late Blake Campbell. Stuart was a poser, basking in the attention.

It would die down.

She didn't care about attention. She cared about avenging a dead old woman.

Where the hell was Bridget and why didn't she have nurses hauling Paul Campbell to the west wing of the building, to where the admitted patients were kept, sedated, and observed?

He'd remained unmoved by the entrance.

"You were in a fight?" Her voice was gentle, cracked.

She winced hoping to the heavens that he wouldn't pick up on the fear that ran through her veins.

One thing she'd learned in practice was an act of patience went a long way when handling frenzied patients. He was delusional. From what she could tell, he was yet to regard her presence. He'd made his way to her, to her office in a state she assumed to be an irritable, angry, or low mood.

Despite looking directly at her, he was yet to notice her.

He shook his head then nodded.

He was hearing her. She reached for her keyboard and opened up his file and noted delusions.

She was suspecting a case of Delusional Disorder.

It had already been made known by Channel Nine News that Blake Campbell had been mentally disturbed… A report that ought not to be made as it tarnished the victim's reputation. Reporter Lucy Wilkens was best known for exclusive controversial reports. It was her

brand. She went deep into the story to get the headlines.

It wasn't irregular for a child groomed by a mentally unstable parent to develop signs of mental distress.

"It wasn't like the last one." At the click and clack of slacks against wood, she glanced up at him. He'd begun to pace the petite space of her office. She'd thoughtlessly recoiled into her seat, picking at her nails. A nervous habit.

She fought it and straightened.

"Tell me about the last one," She reached beneath her table for her bag, not once taking her eyes off Mr. Campbell. She pulled out her phone and turned on the recorder.

"This one was smaller." He stopped, eyes pinned on the wall by the door, his back to her. She eased ever so slightly. He couldn't hurt her when he wasn't looking at her.

What was with her patients and that wall? Two patients in less than an

hour. She didn't think too much into it. It wasn't necessary.

"Who was the last fight with?" She'd chosen her words carefully.

"My mother." Her heart pounded in her chest.

"Do you want to take a seat and talk about it?" He hadn't moved. That worked in her favor. She wasn't entirely comfortable with having him in this state, within reach.

"She lied. I loved her to death, but she was a liar."

"Blake Campbell?" She reached for a pen and a notepad. There was a noticeable quiver in her hands.

"It was after Christmas dinner. Claire had been packing up in the upstairs bedroom."

She tensed. She couldn't get her fingers to move. She'd prepared herself for a confession, she'd anticipated it. Why did she close up all of a sudden when it seemed like he was going to reveal what he'd done to Blake Campbell?

“W-what happened after Christmas dinner?” She held her breath.

Perhaps it was the way he remained unmoved, shoulder’s squared and fists clenched, or the silence he’d retreated into, to the point she couldn’t even hear his breathing, but something in the air didn’t feel right to Lisa Patterson.

She considered the desk phone yet again, this time too panicked to distort the suspense that hung like a raincloud.

“You bitch…” He rasped, he’d cocked his head to the side, and from what Lisa could see from behind her desk, he seemed to be speaking to someone or something by the entrance, by the white oak wood door. “The company was bankrupt. Campbell’s antiques… Campbell’s House of Timber… they were all bankrupt. You didn’t have a dime to your name…” He rolled his

shoulders. There was a bulge in the vein that ran up his forearm.

He took a step. Then another, and another, and Lisa Patterson had let out an audible yelp when his fist collided with the wall by the door. The wall that once balanced a beaten-up car seat. His fist went right through. Her body was victim to trembling.

"Greedy whore couldn't let go of that fucking house… No… and when I asked why you did it…"

She'd reached for the office phone and dialed Julie's desk.

No answer.

Tears ran down her cheeks, hot and fast.

"He gave you permission. That's all you had to tell me." He was glaring daggers at the hole in the wall. She was sobbing, caring little about whether or not he heard her. She'd been in this position before. The last patient had her pinned against the wall behind her desk, his large callous hands curled around her neck. Dean

Gibney had intended to take the life of his cheating wife. He'd seen Lisa as his ex-wife. He'd been as delusional as Paul was at the other end of the room. "He gave you permission to prostitute yourself to save the house…"

With fingers that couldn't seem to click the right buttons again, she tried Bridget's desk. Where was everyone?

"They were right… Those damned Detectives, they were right… you were batshit crazy. You listened to a fucking picture of a dead man and sold yourself… your body to men for money for a house I didn't even live in anymore…"

Bridget answered on the fourth ring.

Her chest filled with hope.

"Help!" She screamed at the top of her lungs.

He turned to her. His eyes had reddened, the left one had a twitch, he'd been hunched over, his breathing, heavy, strained.

"She deserved to die there… in the house he told her to save…she deserved… to die…"

And then he met her gaze. She couldn't breathe.

Channel Six had become the leading news station in Tillamook. They were the CNN of national, small town news! They were number one.

Annabelle hadn't cried this time... Okay, a few stray tears had slid down her rosy cheeks in the shower, but that was it! She'd seen the success coming. Her idea was gold, full-proof. That didn't mean it didn't leave her feeling all warm and fuzzy on the inside. It did.

To celebrate, the night she'd returned to the studio from the event center, from their interview with Josephine and Mark, she'd invited Frank and Amanda for a round of beers at American Angels. As expected, Amanda had opted out.

“I’ve got kids, Riley and Decker, they need me and I can’t find a sitter last minute,” Amanda had leaned against the wall of Annabelle’s cubicle, regret boldly imprinted on her heart shaped face. The woman had the kind of face Annabelle could only describe as ‘camera ready’.

Annabelle didn’t consider herself camera ready. She knew how to do her makeup to the point she was presentable before a lens, but she wouldn’t go as far as describing herself as fitting for the role she played.

When she’d wandered into journalism for the first time, it hadn’t been to become a reporter chasing the story. Sure, Chase had gassed her up, told her that she was made for the camera, but her true calling had been in the role of a broadcast technician. She’d studied Electronics Engineering in the University of Frankfurt for gods’ sakes, where in there did they teach ‘how to be camera ready’?

Becoming a reporter had been an impulse, she'd accompanied Chase to Tillamook and this had been the only available slot in her field. She'd told herself she was in the industry; she could transfer whenever there was an opening. There was never an opening. She couldn't transfer because the current Broadcast Technician Erin Marks was great at his goddamn job.

"You have kids?" She blurted out thoughtlessly, reaching beneath her table for her bag.

"Really?" Amanda had her hands on her hips. Annabelle rummaged through her bag for her phone itching to take another look at the Email Simon Neil had sent her about their ratings.

"I pegged you more as a cat lady." Frank shrugged not once glancing up from his phone.

"Hurtful," Amanda frowned. "My husband is deployed to Caserma-Ederle in Italy; I have two kids; a boy—Decker and a girl—Riley."

“That’s cute, you just never struck me as… motherly?” Frank said. He’d been leaning against the wall by the only picture Annabelle had put up. It was a grinning landscape of she and Chase the day they wandered into Tillamook.

She’d taken the picture on the 101, Chase with his Ray Ban sunglasses had grinned for the camera, his left hand hung loosely over the steering wheel. She’d taken the picture from the passenger seat, her hair dancing in the breeze from the rolled down windows.

Their smiles had held hope for new beginnings. She couldn’t forget the warmth in her chest, the excitement tingling in her fingertips… How could she when the feeling had returned?

If anything, it was stronger as she sat at her wheely chair in her cubicle cornered by the dust covered bookshelf at Channel Six Studios, the night pouring in through the floor

windows. That shelf had as much action as her romance life… it had none.

"Why don't we bring the party to your house?" Annabelle pitched? They had to celebrate. Not only had her idea saved their jobs, but they'd beat Lucy Wilkens. Sure, viewers still tuned into Channel Nine for breaking News, but they were hooked to the story of Blake Campbell, and that was worth popping open a couple of beers.

"Fine, if you can promise to come in after I've put Riley and Decker to sleep, I won't leave you and Frank in the freezing cold."

"What did I do?" Eyebrows furrowed and eyes off his phone, he'd seemed sincerely confused.

Annabelle had taken that as her win and barely lingering around after Amanda had taken her leave, she and Frank set off to Safeway for a carton of beers and enough packets of chips, dips and chocolate bars to take them through the night.

"Isn't that… too much?" He jabbed a finger toward the cart that had more packets of sweet and savory treats than necessary as they approached the checkout.

The Safeway on 4th had been closing when Frank and Annabelle had wandered through the automated doors. They'd gotten there just in time!

"Is there really such a thing as too many chips? And didn't she say she had kids; they might like it." She pushed the squeaking metal cart towards the woman at the checkout line.

"Kids, not an entire pre-school, we could lose a couple." But she didn't want to lose a couple. Did she have to explain that she was scared of going back? Of returning to the Annabelle that would shudder at the thought of carbs and salty snacks?

"We aren't *losing a couple*," She politely retorted. "If you don't finish yours, I will gladly help," She began

placing the whining packets onto the checkout table. The woman eyed her skeptically. What was wrong with people in this town? Couldn't they mind their damn business?

That didn't matter, because, like promised, she and Frank crept into Amanda's home after midnight, after the children had been put to sleep. The News Anchor had a welcoming home. Grey walls accentuated by black and pink floral wallpaper greeted Annabelle—hands hugged around a paper supermarket bag—and Frank who'd lugged a carton of Corona's into the living room. The floors were carpeted and Annabelle didn't need to guess, that hadn't been a design choice but a safety decision.

"You're here!" Amanda had chimed from the couch when Frank had shut the door behind him.

"Of course, we are," Annabelle smiled setting the bag down on the wooden coffee table that barely had any room left on it. Occupied with

magazines, a coffee mug, a coaster and a basket of kid's toys, the paper supermarket bag was close to tipping off the edge.

"How old are Decker and Riley?" Annabelle reached for a plastic baby-doll.

"Decker is five and Riley's three." Dropping the doll back where she'd picked it, Annabelle had to side with Frank on his earlier opinion. Amanda didn't seem all that motherly, but knowing that she was raising two small children, practically on her own, gave Annabelle a new found respect for the woman.

Suddenly, Amanda's overbearing personality made a little more sense.

"We did it!" Frank pulled three bottles out of the carton and set it on the floor by the coffee table.

"And we can rub it in that bitch Lucy Wilken's face!" Annabelle agreed as Frank handed the bottles to them.

"To being number one," He rose his bottle.

"Eherm," Amanda interrupted pushing herself off her sunshine yellow plush couch and onto her feet. "To Annabelle, because we sure as hell wouldn't have thought about this ourselves." She held Annabelle in a stare that wailed of admiration.

With a smile she couldn't contain, Annabelle clicked her glass with her colleagues.

From a woman scorned for her lack of initiative, she's been able to not only save her job, boost the Studio's ratings and make two friends along the way.

She wouldn't have her success any other way.

The following morning, Annabelle Dawson strutted with confidence out of her car and onto the yard of Faith Thomson. She was the next person they'd chosen to interview, bringing the story to familiar grounds. In her mid-fifties,

the woman had been a friend of the deceased.

Like a broken recorder, Annabelle couldn't stop rerunning her own satisfaction. She'd beat Lucy Wilkens. She was the top reporter in Tillamook! And Simon Neil had bumped up her pay.

She'd beat her rival and gotten a raise.

Things couldn't get any better…

She stopped by Amanda and Faith in the middle of the yard.

Faith Thompson been home, peering through the window when Blake Campbell had pulled up by the curb of her house on 6th. Why Blake hadn't gone to her own home that night, Faith couldn't answer.

"And did you ask, Blake?" Amanda followed the whiskey skinned woman up her porch steps. The house was small, bright blue with a single window at the top. Overgrown grass ran up the yard and Annabelle couldn't help but wonder

why the elderly woman hadn't taken any care of her blue house on 6th. With a little trimming and weeding, the yard could mirror the neighbouring homes.

Faith didn't look like the kind of woman that lived in the little blue house. The woman was chubby, well put together and clean, heart shaped face glimmering in the afternoon sun, cat-like-eyes fringed with long lashes and cupids bow lips glossed. The home had cracked windows, broken window sills and holes in the porch steps. How did a woman that managed to get makeup on live in a home that had been falling apart?

"I did, but she didn't tell me anything. She just said that she couldn't bare going home all by herself."

"And her son? Didn't she care that her son was home?" Annabelle wanted to know. She followed in front of Frank's rolling camera. The inside of the house was dark, grim and as

she'd imagined, as unkept as the outside, clothes covered the floors, the walls were a dark brown. No pictures hung on the walls.

Her stomach was upset.

"She didn't care."

Annabelle gulped.

"Can you tell us a bit more of what had happened that night?" Amanda had rooted herself by the entrance, uninterested in taking any further steps into the little blue house on 6th. Annabelle didn't blame her friend; she didn't think she had it in her to explore more than she'd seen already.

"Well, I'd been curious, so I gently pulled open that front door," The woman pointed to the camera. "And with the porch lights off, perched on a bench by the door."

Blake Campbell hadn't confronted Richard Dean at the party. No, she'd

waited till he'd driven her home to express her disappointment. She'd pressed her lips in a thin line, thin carved eyebrows drawn together and a nagging voice at the back of her mind. She was stupid. How could she have fallen for the little act of kindness he'd displayed in front of his mother?

He was as much a shark as everyone else in Tillamook. He was a monster.

No one was as good to her as Christopher had been.

"What the hell was that?" She'd sat beneath the twilight, in the passenger seat of his Rolls-Royce Silver Seraph. He had the same cars Christopher had, but he didn't have the same heart. Christopher Campbell had been a good man, a loving one who'd respected her. Richard didn't and he'd more than proved his opinion of her.

"You're welcome," He'd smiled smugly at her. A prostitute? Was that what she looked like to him? She

couldn't deny her sense of style was provocative, and the media had painted her as a gold-digging slut, but didn't he see through that? Or was he as narrowminded as everyone else?

"I am not a prostitute!" Her tone was firm. She wasn't angry. She was beyond that. Disappointed maybe, but she didn't have it in her to yell at him. It wasn't the first time someone had thrown it in her face that she was cheap. She'd shrugged college and chose to marry an old man, to everyone else, she was a whore, but could she help it if she'd fallen for the older man? Hell, she was sure half of Tillamook thought that she was a skank for marrying a man that was thirty years older than she was. But not once did they stop to consider, maybe she was happy with that older man, maybe he saw a side of her no one in her conservative small town could see. "You wanted *business*, didn't you?" He tipped his head as if

she was the one that needed to be understood.

"Yes, business for my antique store!" He chuckled.

"That old place? When I walked in, I thought you were ready to shut it down," He killed the engine of the car.

"I want to keep it from going bankrupt." She explained.

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, Princess, but your business is as dead as your husband. I'm offering you an opportunity to make real money." With a clenched fist, her teeth clutched onto her bottom lip, she let herself out of his car.

He rolled down the passenger window. "In this business, we can both earn our keep."

She huffed. "This is why I married Christopher; he doesn't think like a child."

"Stop trying to justify your mistake, Campbell." The engine revved to life once more. "And

despite being a complete bitch, I'll be waiting if you want to take these men up on their offer to make you a very rich woman."

"Go to hell, Richard Dean."

Pulling out of the curb and onto the street, he'd taken her words all too literally.

His body was found the following morning.

CHAPTER SIX

The night that never ended…

The walk was quiet and far. She'd been on this path before. The long stretch by the shore, lulled by the music of the waves kissing the cool sand. The last she'd been there hadn't been with Cecilia. It had been after.

After the shattered glass had been sprinkled like salt by the kitchen window, after the bloodcurdling screams had gone unheard, and long after the body had been uncovered.

The guilt that had pursued her had been steadfast.

In a bid to not get swept away by memories that threatened to pull her under in its tousled updrafts, she drew to a stop. This was too close to home. Too close to the woman who'd been buried years, but her grip on her daughter was unwavering.

As if sensing that she was no longer trailing behind his rapid strides, Detective Dawson paused, turned and tilted his head in a wordless question.

One that went unanswered.

"Come on, Olson, can't be tired already? Short walk by the shore got you beat?"

"That's not it," She wasn't lazy. Nor was she tired. Yes, her day had put her through the ringer, but that didn't mean she didn't have it in her for an evening hike.

She was afraid.

Unprepared to face what another step in Cape Lookout would do to her.

He surveyed his surroundings. People still dotted the shores, in the

distance, a family of three had been taking a stroll. The mother had been on the phone while the man had his sons' hand in his.

"At her funeral," He turned to her. She hadn't been looking at him. No, her head had been ducked, her bare feet buried in the sand. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. "They claimed she loved her daughter the most. She did… she love me, so much…but not compared to this place…Cecilia loved Cape Lookout. That, I can guarantee…" Rachel Olson's voice had been scratchy, trailed off in a dry, bitter laugh.

The sand was gentle between her toes, the feeling was euphoric against her famished feet that yearned for it. She kicked off her flip-flops, taking them in her hand. "I was never a fan but, for her, I'd grown to hate it a little less growing up," She peeked up from where she'd been tracing shapes in the sand with her big toe. "There was a way she would smile when she

was here, running into the waves like a little kid. There was a way her eyes would glimmer…" She pointed to her eyes as she spoke of her mother. If there was one thing Rachel had picked up from Cecilia aside from her skin, it had been her eyes. She couldn't forget looking in the mirror with a fresh wound of grief throbbing in her chest and seeing a reflection of Cecilia. "She was killed in a robbery, right here in Tillamook." She whirled with a hand stretched towards the parking lot, "Not too far down the street in our home in the area."

She cracked open the door of recollections, letting everything tumble out into the open. "I wasn't there. I wasn't home. I was with my father, Donovan Olson at the time…"

Beneath the night's glare and in the brine-stained glacial arms of the gust wafting from the ocean, Rachel Olson remembered her mother in the presence of the forbidden man she was falling hard and fast for. His skin

had shone, a dull enticing glow in the moonlight. His toned chiseled torso had called to her and she'd for a moment deliberated what it would be like to be in his firm embrace, to have the seductive woody incense-like aroma he was known for, cloak her in a mist.

"Stroke of luck, huh?"

She'd heard it. Time and time again. Everyone that knew her story pegged her as lucky, she wasn't there when it happened. Was dealing with the untimely death of her mother lucky? Having the image of her mother's empty eyes glaring up at her considered lucky?

She'd never once counted herself lucky.

Especially after Cecilia Jackson-Brown's case had gone cold for a lack of evidence and witnesses.

Detective Dawson when she hadn't responded had let out a breath and remained there, close enough for her to reach out a hand and run it over

his mischievous chest, and far enough that she could exercise the thread of control she had left.

This wasn't the time for sinful thoughts to cloud her reasoning. This wasn't right.

Her first time back to Cape Lookout in years and she was contemplating deliciously wicked things to do to her co-Detective.

She shook her head. "I joined the force because of her. I treat every case like the one she deserved. I have my reasons and my pace." Her mood turned sour and all she could bring to mind were all the times he'd told her not to handle her cases in the best way she knew how.

The times he'd shoved in her face that she'd only handled two murder cases. Yes, she'd only handled two, one of which she was yet to conclude. These were two cases she'd taken her time to handle with as much precision as she would have her mother's case.

He and Lieutenant Wilson could go to hell. She had her method when it came to murder cases. They meant more to her than any other case that could be slapped on her table. They meant more to her than anyone on the force in her opinion.

She worked with a diligence and seething determination. She was yet to meet someone that paralleled that.

She'd been deceived, led to assume that she'd seen snippets of a passion in Detective Dawson… it was a smoke screen. He didn't care about the cases he was faced with, he cared about the money, the bonuses, his debt.

This was good, anger was good, anger wasn't unrequited feelings, anger wasn't an alluring lust for a man she couldn't have.

"I care about the victims, Dawson. I care about the families, because we don't see it but they're hurting when we don't go the extra mile."

He took a step closer, and her breath got caught in her throat. “I know that.”

No, he didn’t. If he did, he wouldn’t have let countless cases go cold because he couldn’t go take that extra step. He wouldn’t treat his cases like the big men in the black jackets that had let her mother’s killer flee. She’d sworn to Cecilia that even if she couldn’t find and catch the man that did that to her, she would prevent other men like him from getting away with their evil deeds, their crimes against humanity. She would be the difference Tillamook so desperately needed.

“Then why don’t you care, Dawson. Why the hell don’t you give a shit about, Blake Campbell.” Rachel forced a strength into her voice that she knew she didn’t have.

He closed the distance with a single step. With her head tipped upwards, she’d met his deep brown eyes, in the night, they’d seemed

almost black. They didn't just compete with hers, they won, they were much darker and harder to read.

"I can't tell you I care, Olson. That would be lying, and I respect you too much to lie to you." Her lips drew back in a snarl. "But and because we've had this conversation before, I will confess that you've shown me a different outlook on her case."

"Not just her case," She whined. He chuckled his chest rumbling softly with the retreating sound.

"Not just her case." He echoed. His features closed up again. His scent drifted across her nostrils and for the first time in a long time, since Mathew, she craved for a man's touch, to be in Detective Dawson's strong hands, to let her plights melt away as his skin danced with hers.

Brown eyes found his lips and she could feel her pulse quicken. They were a blush pink cupids' arrow that she longed to feel against hers. "You

have to understand *my* standpoint as well." He'd spoken to her with the tenderness of a loved one. He didn't love her. He didn't even replicate the desires she had. Her shoulders fell. "I don't feel the ache you've nurtured for years… I have my own motive. And that's gotta count for something."

She didn't know what to think. He was driven by a desire to pay off a debt. That wasn't enough, that wasn't nearly enough to count was it? It couldn't be enough. And yet, as a sturdy arm wrapped her waist, and lips brushed against hers she was inclined to reconsider.

Criminal Law Professor Claire Fisher was getting nowhere with Melissa Archer. The woman was as stubborn as nails.

Claire had encountered stubborn before, she had students that were twice Melissa Archer. Stubborn as mules, her students, especially the

ones that refused to turn in their assignments and made her job that much harder.

She was ready for what the night had in store with Melissa Archer, and she wasn't going to leave until she'd gotten substantive proof of the woman's involvement in the Campbell murder case.

In the hour and half, she'd spent in the Campbell woman's living room, she'd learned more about the late Christopher Campbell than she had Blake. She'd learned of his Timber exporting company, and how not too long into his marriage with Blake competitors had gained an upper hand of what was once a multi-million-dollar company. They'd begun to lose clients and Christopher had fallen into a depression that later caused his stroke.

He'd died in the Campbell home on Miller Avenue. On the same bed Blake Campbell had been found.

This was more than a coincidence. This woman's knowledge of this meant something.

And just when Claire thought she was making progress with Melissa Campbell, she'd withdrawn. Changed the topic and mumbled on and on about how much Christopher loved foot massages.

She didn't want to hear about how Christopher liked his feet rubbed before bed. She'd hunted this woman down to discuss Blake Campbell who'd moved in with a man who was still legally married to a woman who'd stepped out of the way despite the unofficial divorce.

Even in her years studying case after case in law school she'd never stumbled upon anything like this. Blake had as well been a victim of a deceptive husband who claimed to wed her under the claim that he was a divorcee. He'd never concluded the process and the poor old woman hadn't looked into it.

To her, she was legally married. And her killer had taunted her by assaulting her in the very dress she'd supposedly gotten married in.

"I know about the divorce, Melissa." Claire spat. The patient dog would die of an ulcer at this pace. "I want to know why you let your husband's mistress live with him under the pretense of a valid marriage."

The woman seemed unphased by this. She'd shrugged a shoulder and returned her attention to the book. Sometime during the hour, she'd turned on the small television in the corner and gotten up to handle the mug on the coffee table. She'd had her leg up on it now, stretched out on the armchair and the book between her hands.

Claire had been on her feet for as long as she could remember. She didn't know how much more she could take before she would lead herself to the door. In the meantime,

she was persistent, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, taking time to jut out her hip and recite a shiva mantra to calm her restless mind.

"I'm not a killer, Detective. I am a woman who wants to finish a goddamn book in peace."

"I am not accusing you, Miss. Campbell."

"And stop calling me that, the dead woman is the real, Miss Campbell."

"His mistress,"

"If that's what you want to call her, be my guest." The woman was irritable. And it took everything in Claire not to up and leave. To dart into the night and into her ever-growing concerns for the whereabouts of her fiancé.

She didn't want to give in to the anxiety that gurgled in the depths of her stomach, the questions that nearly had her toppling over, gasping for a breath as she shook them out of her head. Paul was safe and that was all

she wanted to tell herself. He was fine. Wherever he was. He would get back to her when he could and he would explain where he'd vanished to, her best bet, the scene of the crime and he hadn't been able to bring himself from his old home.

"Why didn't you conclude the divorce process?"

"Because I live for the drama," The woman flipped a page in her book.

"Your husband is dead, and his mistress mysteriously dies years later in the home she lived in with your husband, she was attacked with a kitchen knife."

"The bitch deserved it, I heard she was strangled too." The cackle that came from Melissa was agitating to Claire's ears.

"She took over your company and ran it to the ground." Claire was grasping at straws. This woman wasn't giving her anything. She was getting nowhere.

"You think I did it." Melissa Campbell shut her book, placed her legs down and rose to her feet.

"You've overstayed your welcome, Detective. And next time, call me in for questioning at your precinct, don't barge into my home and accuse me of a murder I couldn't for the life of me carry out." She stopped at her door, undid the bolts and drew it open.

"Sure, I hated the whore, but when I learned that she'd become nothing more than a prostitute I let her be."

Blake Campbell had been a call-girl?

Was there ever a good time to be a dead woman in Tillamook? Regan Sinclair didn't have an answer to that. But Blake Campbell sure as hell

picked the wrong time to be subject of an ongoing investigation while her killer had a four-year tenure.

Regan would rather return to her second husband over and over again and walk in on him plowing her sister in her Tillamook home before she would let Governor Bernard Sutter sweep the case of the body on Miller Avenue under his ratchet dusty carpet. She could only wonder how many other women like Blake had already been covered up, their case, cold and closed.

Her baby blue Aquazzura heels clicked and clacked against the wide stone steps of the Oregon State Capitol building in Salem. The ride down from her office had been a moment to collect her rattled thoughts. A moment mule over her decision to fight for a woman who could just as easily be forgotten. She hadn't been able to pursue Governor Sutter after their brief meeting at the

office of the District Attorney in Tillamook.

After he'd voiced his need to shut down investigations on the Campbell case, he'd parted ways with the executive team and Tom had further conveyed his disdain with D.A. Sinclair, giving little consideration to the impression it would have on her peers.

That was just Tom being Tom, as Christian had so put it, he was indeed mad with power. Patient to a fault, she'd given him a listening ear. She should have gone after Bernard Sutter.

She'd known then what had been on the line.

If he were to express his plans to the Attorney General, it would be irreversible.

Too late.

And yet, she hadn't leaped from her seat at the meeting, darting after Sutter like a lost puppy.

No, she'd dawdled behind. After the meeting had conveniently drawn to an end, she'd returned to her office with Christian Lewis and made multiple attempts of convincing him to handle the contract for Lisa Patterson.

He was more than capable. Having graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School before it was even notable. And being one of her closest confidants in the work place she couldn't count on anyone else to do her bidding.

She couldn't depend on anyone to understand why it had been imperative that contract was completed as soon as possible. There was something in that woman's eyes that reeled her in. She longed to experience tingles of pleasure at the woman's touch. To listen to her honey laden voice over and over.

It was pitch black overhead, and the night whistled with a pending storm, accompanied by an earthy

smell. That didn't seem too pleasing. It had a thing or two to do with the fact that when it rained in Oregon, it poured.

The smell, and whipping breeze was long gone through the large brass doors, and instead replaced with an almost suffocating stench of air-freshener and the soft caress of multiple air-conditioners.

Regan Sinclair followed the way she knew by memory. This wasn't her first time in the Capitol Building. She hadn't been stopped or questioned by the woman with the bright yellow tie behind the front desk, or the men by the door in uniforms. How hadn't she noticed them when she walked in?

That didn't matter.

However, being the District Attorney of Tillamook County had its perks.

No one could approach her unless they had good reason.

She continued on, bearing no mind to the murmurs and mumbles carried by the walls.

She took a left by the blown-up image of Attorney General Johnson Delaney. Her tongue was a desert. Footstep against the polished marble floors, the only noise in the spacious corridor. Closer, the knots in her stomach tightened. The corridor was lined by hardwood doors half the size of the one main entrance, doors beneath a bronze plaque title. She'd walked passed the office of the Treasurer and three other doors marked senate when she stopped by the polished silver elevator doors at the end of hall. There was no guarantee that Sutter would still be at his office.

She clicked the buttons on the wall.

She was hours late.

She clicked it again.

He could be in his home, doing God knows what.

She glanced at the number above the metal doors, her ears subtly ringing.

Hell, there was no reason why he wouldn't have already relayed his agenda to Delaney hours before she'd even left her office in Tillamook, no reason why he wouldn't have already set his plans in stone.

She was restless. One glance over her left shoulder and her finger was back on the button. She would convince the entire Capitol Building if she had to, but she wasn't going to let Sutter walk away with another body. Not this time. No, the last time, she hadn't been the District Attorney. This time, she had wings and boy was she going to spread them.

The doors parted and two, *very* drunk men strode out, their chuckles simmering at the sight of a disgruntled Regan Sinclair.

She pulled like a veil, a blank expression over her features.

“Sinclair…what are you doing in… Salem?” Delaney slurred. She’d worked with him only twice since she’d been appointed District Attorney. And only once had she been brought to Salem because of it.

Her jaw clenched; this was her chance. She squared her shoulders and peered at the men through narrowed eyes.

“We need to have a talk,” She paused gesturing to the space between them. “The three of us.”

Sutter huffed.

“Not… possible, Sinclair, we were just heading out.” Sutter attempted to push past her. She didn’t budge and soaked in liquor, he didn’t have as much strength in arms that were no more than fast-food and beer.

“I wouldn’t drive all the way down to Salem if it wasn’t important,” She tilted her head and took a good look at him. He could barely meet her eyes.

This was the Governor of Tillamook, Mr. Hydes drunk.

Pathetic.

“Schedule it with my assistant like a good-girl,” Bernard Sutter made another move to leave, a move to squeeze past her.

That too was ineffective when she called out; “I wouldn’t leave if I were you, Sutter.”

He was motionless for the longest time and returned to her. “And why the hell not?” He was getting agitated with her presence. “You’re forgetting who the hell I am, Sinclair, you are where you are because of me,” He jabbed a hand out, poking her chest.

She pushed his hand away and rubbed a flat palm over the place he’d poked. She didn’t appreciate being touched, especially without her consent. And she’d made sure the scowl on her face depicted that.

He propped himself up against the egg-white wall, by a wall light, too tipsy to remain on his own two feet

without toppling over. How had he intended to make his way out of the Capitol building in that state?

That didn't concern her. Whatever night of drinking they had planned could wait. What she had to say couldn't. She didn't care that he was the Governor.

Bernard Sutter was a killer, and she would risk her position as District Attorney to see that he is brought to justice.

She had too many people counting on her. It wasn't just the people of Tillamook, it wasn't just the Detectives and investigators that had already invested time, energy and funds allocated from her office, it was Christian who couldn't seem to stop asking about the Campbell case since it happened. It was Lisa Patterson who was in direct contact with the son of the deceased. She could only imagine what he was going through.

The families were always on the bitter end of cases like this.

If she couldn't get Governor Sutter to reconsider, everything they'd worked for, would be buried with the body of Blake Campbell.

Her nostrils flared. She wasn't going to let that happen.

She took a step closer to Sutter. She was aware of his scrutinizing, calculated gaze, and not just his, Delaney's as well. He'd been in a better state of mind than Sutter, sober enough to be perched upright, hands shoved in the pockets of his slacks. She leaned till her lips were inches from Sutter's fat flabby ear.

She was Daniel in the lion's den.

The difference? This lion could actually take her life without an eyelash batted.

She could hear her heart barking in her chest.

"I know who killed Blake Campbell, and I don't think Delaney would benefit from knowing, the killer is right under his nose…" She

pulled away, a hand smoothening down her maroon Balmain skirt.

She just didn't want to look at him.

To give him the pleasure knowing the effect he had on her.

She was threading a thin line. If indeed he was the man, she painted him to be, she ought to sleep with one eye open.

Regan didn't need to doubt it, she'd come across the articles, the cases he'd paid to have forgotten.

His last victim, Miranda Anderson hadn't had the media on her side, protesters ready to take to the street and howl for the authorities to avenge her name. Blake Campbell did. And Regan was going to stop at nothing till her assailant was rotting in a prison cell for the rest of his life.

Before, she had the element of surprise, she'd lost that.

Bernard Sutter knew that suspected him for the murder. The ball was in his court, to kill her like he

did Blake Campbell, or dance to her tune.

Whatever the case, he seemed to have sobered up at her words, if the daggers he shot at her from his eyes was any indication.

"Delaney, Sinclair, my office." He straightened, a hand tugging at the hem of his blazer. When none of them made a motion to move, he added, rather roughly; "Now!" Johnson Delaney had blinked and clicked the elevator doors apart. They shuffled into the spacious mirrored box.

The Capitol Building being the third to house Oregon's government after a fire claimed the first two fifty-years-apart-from each other, had been rebuilt with an improved security system, and a modern architectural construct.

The doors slid apart, and Sutter was quick on his short sturdy legs. He'd led them to his office, past his assistant's vacant desk.

She didn't expect anyone to be at the office at this time, nearing 10:00 P.M. He pushed through the door above which hung a bronze plaque titled Governor. On the wood of the door was a smaller sign that read; Tillamook.

His office in Salem was twice the size of what she had in Tillamook. The layout was simple, a marble desk in the middle of the room, on top which stood a near empty bottle of Remy Martin. Another table had been pressed to the wall by the right. The chair from which had been pulled to the marble table. Two American flags stood at either side of a grandfather clock pressed behind Sutter's desk chair. There was little else in the room aside a stone sculpture of a man; head and shoulders against a stone platform by the only window in the room.

"Unless this has to do with a state of emergency, I don't know why we're letting Tillamook's D.A. dictate what we do with our night." Delaney

slumped onto the chair that had been dragged to the marble table. Sutter got comfortable in his chair. She was fine on her feet. She didn't intend to stay long with both men.

"She's not dictating our night, but she does have somethings to say. Things I will warn if she doesn't want to resign early, she would keep to herself."

It was her turn to chuckle, softly to herself. She didn't care if he were going to make her resign—not completely true, she'd come to love her role as District Attorney, and she was barely on her second year and the Governor of Tillamook was threatening to make her resign.

"Fellas," She wore a smile, but her eyes were pained. "Now that I have your attention, apologies for this…unscheduled meeting, but Tillamook is in a turmoil, the people are dissatisfied with the murder of a fifty-six-year-old Blake Campbell." She paced the room as she spoke,

making sure to keep her eyes on a single man. The dissatisfied Bernard Sutter. "And my colleagues have been throwing it around that this case, like many others should be left to go cold, not realizing the impact that's going to have."

Johnson Delaney sat up in his seat, intrigued by her words. She had his attention. With the Attorney General on her side, Sutter wouldn't dare touch a hair on her head. And from what it seemed; Sutter hadn't conveyed his intentions to Delaney.

Yes, luck was on her side.

But for how long?

"We're going to see statewide protests, larger than the gathering of the LGBTQ community. We're going to welcome riots, and blood that would stain the streets from this gathering alone." She steepled her hands and took a breath, "We can prevent this."

"We just need to find a killer," Delaney finished for her.

Bernard Sutter's features had been scrunched up behind his desk.

He wasn't happy.

She could only hide behind Delaney for so long before he got his hands on her. Until then, she was going to keep Blake Campbell's case open.

Annabelle Dawson's last interview on the Campbell case had been with the owner of Mocha on the Rocks, a café on 6th Street. Mere minutes from finishing with the little blue house on 6th, she'd convinced her team to kill two birds with one stone.

The night wasn't a threat to Annabelle Dawson if her career had taught her anything, it was that she could schedule appointments and work through the darkness outside.

The woman she'd called at the last minute had been a workaholic much like Annabelle.

Gina Laval had been by her desk in her petite white office in a back room in her café when Annabelle and Amanda had let themselves in, Frank lingering by the front of the counter to set up.

"Thanks so much for agreeing to speak with us," Annabelle shook the woman's hand. Gina was old, not nearly as old as Faith had been, but Annabelle saw the salt hair peeking out from the die.

"No problem. I think you're going to benefit from speaking to me," The woman returned to her seat, a radiant smile on her round face.

"How so?" Amanda wanted to know. She'd let her hair loose from the tight ponytail it had been in at the little blue house on 6th.

"This isn't going to be like any of your other interviews," That sentence had adrenaline surging through Annabelle's veins. If there was anything she needed for her last interview, it was tension.

"You've seen our documentary?" Annabelle was wide eyed and jittery, and she was forty percent sure it had little to do with compulsively snacking on sugar-doughnuts on the ride over in their Channel Six news van.

"Who hasn't! You guys are great!" Annabelle grinned. She couldn't wait to tell Chase. The people of Tillamook knew who she was, knew what she did!

"Alright, if you're done here, we would like to begin this interview before it gets any darker outside," Amanda instructed letting herself out of the woman's office.

Annabelle escorted the woman to where Frank had his lights and camera stand erected.

She had to commend the guy; he was able to turn any setting into a miniature studio in minutes. That took skill.

Getting into place by a table for three, she gave him the signal to begin

rolling the tapes. This was it, their final interview.

"We all know Blake Campbell was a schizophrenic, well, I think this interview is going to paint a picture of how it all started…" Gina said confidently once she acknowledged the red light on the side of the camera.

Richard Dean's death had been ruled as an accident, at an intersection somewhere on 5th Street. His smug face had been plastered over the papers. But that hadn't been where Blake Campbell had learned about his death initially.

The morning after the banquet, she'd found herself in a familiar setting. A café on 6th, Mocha on the Rocks. The petite room of tables and chairs, of people bustling about their day from the front counter to their table to the papers scattered before them, was medicinal to Blake Campbell's rattled nerves. Seated, her

phone in her hand, in wait for her friends to pick up her calls, she'd opened the drawer to a whirl of bitter recollections.

Gina who'd been behind the counter had been intrigued by Blake Campbell's presence.

She knew of Christopher Campbell's death, his battle with coronary heart disease, a story that had made the headline on Tillamook Times. Blake Campbell had opened up about his death, how he hadn't just died in their home all of a sudden. It wasn't something she didn't see coming. She did. He hadn't died of natural causes, age. He was ill for much too long. She'd told the newspaper that he'd kept the diagnoses to himself for the first few years of their marriage, but it wasn't the kind of thing he could hide forever. The hospital visits were piling up and her questions had been

insistent. He was never a good liar. He didn't have much time.

"…I'm dying," She told Tillamook Times that she would have been able to choke it down if her new husband cheating, she'd already been suspecting it… For God's sake, she would have been able to stomach learning that he had another family tucked away somewhere… she hadn't been ready to face the reality of marrying a man thirty-years older… He didn't have as much time as she did. He would never have as much time.

What else could she have done aside pulling him into her warm embrace, besides sticking by him through sickness… she couldn't hope for health… the chances of surviving coronary heart disease were slim and she'd made peace with that.

And even though she hadn't wanted one in the first place, she confessed in her interview, her greatest joy, was being able to give

her dying husband a son before he passed.

"I can't thank you enough for that kid," A familiar breathy, tired voice said. She looked up from her phone. Green eyes stared back at her. Chapped pencil thin lips had been set in a hard line, his salty beard hair was overgrown, the lines and wrinkles on his features had been defined with time.

"You could try," She returned her attention to the device in her hands. Gina couldn't forget hearing Blake Campbell say, returning her attention to the device in her hands. Who the hell was the woman speaking to?

"You never wanted me to have one of these," She slid it over to her late husband. It wasn't the first time he'd come to her since his passing.

"And I had my reasons, you just never cared to listen." He didn't sound as offended as she'd assumed, he would be.

“I was always so stubborn when it came to listening to you,” He chuckled. It was a gruff hefty sound, one she’d missed. His lean fingers still wrapped around his generous stomach as the sound simmered down.

He’d been staring at the sad smile on her long face.

“One of the things I loved about you.” He placed his hands on the table. “Look, Sweetie, I know your heart is in the right place. I know that you’re willing to do anything to give our son the life he deserves,”

“Prostitution?” Her disgust was written boldly on her features. Her nose had scrunched, her eyebrows furrowed and lips pursed. Something in the air made her nauseous.

“If I were here, Darling, I wouldn’t allow you. Hell, I would make sure the scumbag that did this to you died a more painful death,” She had a bitter taste in her mouth.

"Richard is dead?" To her question, Christopher rose a trembling finger to the newspaper that had fallen to floor by her feet. Richard Dean's smug face had been plastered over the front page, the headline in bold black ink reading 'Business mogul Richard Dean confirmed dead in a car accident on 5th Street'.

Guilt sunk it's claws into her tender flesh. "I didn't mean it when I said he should go to hell… I…" She ran a quivering hand through her hair, bottom lip between her teeth and eyes soaked.

"He got what he deserved." Christopher assured her.

"He didn't deserve to die. No one deserves to die." She leaned forward, her voice faint, cracked.

"News flash, I died, Honey." She sunk back into her seat. "Paul deserves the best, Blake. And that means doing whatever it takes."

She didn't want to do whatever it took. She didn't want to sell her body to old men for money.

"There has to be another way, can't I market Campbell's Antiques?"

"The life Paul deserves lies behind a very difficult decision, Sweetie. And…" He took her hand in his boney, wiry ones, a tear ran down her cheek. "I know you won't let me down; you won't let our son down…"

He was gone as quickly as he'd appeared.

He'd given her permission to enter a world of sex and drugs. She didn't know how to feel about that.

"I was certain the woman was crazy, the problem was, my café was empty and no one else got to see it!" Gina admitted to the camera. Annabelle wished someone could corroborate the woman's story.

She wasn't that lucky.

Lisa Patterson hadn't let them take Paul Campbell away to a ward. She couldn't let that happen. She knew what that entailed.

He wouldn't just be strapped to a bed, sedated, and left to wither away like the rest of their condemned patients, their bank accounts drained until they could no longer afford a treatment with the center. No, with who he was, he would be a target.

He couldn't leave her office. Not with them.

She was trembling and the tears that stained her cheeks were barely dry when she'd heard her voice, hoarse and small, moan. "Don't take him."

Her gasps for a breath filled the air in the room. Her chest had yet to stop rapidly rising and falling.

Both his hands had been restrained by night nurses, and he'd let his head hang low on tired

shoulders. His legs hadn't given away. He was conscious. Listening.

She'd managed with her frightened screams to gathered two nurses and Bridget by her door, by Paul Campbell.

She placed the receiver of the phone that was still in her hand back where it belonged.

At least she knew she could count on her colleagues when push came to shove.

"What do you mean don't take him? He needs observation, Lisa." One of the nurses chipped in. Lisa knew her from her ward rotations. She was Debby Jane Alan, Debby-Jane to her colleagues. Debby was a generous sized brown woman much like Lisa but inches shorter and had luscious full lips that defined her round face.

Lisa didn't try to talk, too frantic to utter a reasonable sentence. She needed time to soothe her nerves.

She needed the one thing she didn't have.

But she couldn't let them take Paul away from her. Their sessions needed to continue. She needed a confession. He'd done this. She no one could convince her otherwise. He wasn't stable. How else could he have gotten away with it?

He'd assumably had an episode, one that cost him the life of his mother. And the wedding dress? A taunt by the son of a woman of the night. She couldn't imagine what had been going through his head that night.

She didn't want a mental picture.

What she longed for, was a confession.

Proof that she could take to the Sherriff's department and file a complaint.

Lisa Patterson didn't have that yet and until she did, she needed to spent a little more time with the man that put a hole through her office door.

Shit!

It was still the better option.

If the board of directors were to find out about him, their sessions, everything would be snatched, like a carpet pulled from underneath her. He would become their lab rat. Not only would they interrogate him and push him farther away from reality, but they'll accost her for her unrecorded sessions, not only would she have a cell waiting for her, but she wouldn't have a job to return to upon her eventual release.

Yes, she was selfish, she had a motive for keeping Paul Campbell around, to satisfy her ceaseless need to be right.

And to what end?

She couldn't say that desire, had her cowering. She was avenging a woman who didn't deserve the brutal end she met at the hands of her son.

How was that to frighten her?

She shook her head, and repeated. "Don't take him." And with palms pressed on her scattered desk, with arms that wobbled like wet spaghetti,

she forced herself off her chair to her feet. “He’s not a patient, he’s fine we just had a little… disagreement.”

Lying had become too easy for Dr. Patterson.

Was it always like this?

Debby-Jane didn’t seem convinced. She looked over Paul’s shoulder to the other woman restraining his arm. “You buying this?”

“I don’t really know the dynamic around here,” The girl who’d answered was Evie, a new recruit to the center. Lisa wasn’t acquainted with the new face. But she’d heard about her from Julie who couldn’t seem to shut up about the newbies floating around like freshmen.

“The dynamic is we were walking by and heard a scream for help. Now we could either take this man to the ward or get him out of our institution.”

Lisa's eyes squeezed shut. "Fine, get him out, he's parked out front, but he can walk."

Debby-Jane and Evie shared a disbelieving look.

Even she didn't believe her own words. But she needed him to cooperate. Just until she got him outside. She would figure something out then.

He couldn't drive himself home. Not in his state.

Neither could she drive him, not after what he'd displayed.

"You can walk, can't you, Paul?" She'd made sure to project her voice, to lace it with that recognizable firm tone she'd used on him since their first session.

She couldn't show a shred of fear in his presence. Not right now. He would feed off her distress. She didn't need that.

He was unresponsive and a sweat streaked down from her forehead,

mixing with the tear stains on her cheek.

She couldn't wait to get home. She'd been through the ringer enough already.

"You're parked outside, Paul, stop being so goddamn dramatic," His head bobbed.

"I know you're upset," She rounded her table. "But we need to talk about this *outside*, and not in the presence of… so many people." She eyed Debby-Jane who despite Lisa's efforts didn't seem like she was going to let go of Paul Campbell.

His head rose and those blue-green eyes had softened. They'd begged for help, his dried chapped lips had opened and shut, once, twice, and then she heard it, a barely audible groan. A small celebratory giggle escaped her. He was back. He wasn't the monster that had looked at her with a murderous intent. At least at the moment, he wasn't. She could further study the episode he'd just

displayed when she got him to a more tranquil environment.

Where the hell would that be?

She turned to Debby-Jane and in a more authoritative stance, asked; "Can you both please let go of my friend?"

Evie had been the first to untangle her hands from Mr. Campbell.

"Next time don't scream for help like that if you're just going to push us away." Debby-Jane released Paul who'd stumbled and straightened. "Some of us have things to do."

"I'm sorry for the false alarm,"

Bridget who'd been yet to say anything nodded to the door.

"I'll schedule a carpenter to come by and handle this by tomorrow."

Paul had been shaking his head, a hand running through his ruffled hair. "I can, get that. It's the least I can do."

"No," The anger that ran through her was foreign. She didn't bother to hide it. Not only had he frightened

her, but he'd almost cost her their private sessions. She wasn't going to let him do anything more. He'd done enough.

She'd grabbed him roughly by the wrist and pulled him towards the chairs by her desk giving little concern to the opinions of Bridget, Debby-Jane, or Evie. "Ignore him, get someone to fix that before Stuart sees it and makes me the topic of conversation in the breakroom."

Bridget nodded. Lisa hadn't noticed it before, but the woman had her hands folded over her chest in a reproving manner.

"What time would you be in tomorrow?"

The floor secretary wanted to know. She'd sounded tired. Lisa would have liked to sound the same, would have liked to not have her heart rate skyrocket because of the patients she'd faced during her work day.

"I'll call before I come in, but please have it fixed before I come in."

And with that she'd turned Paul Campbell.

He'd looked at her like a child anticipating a scolding. She didn't even know if she had it in her to reprimand him.

"Can you please give us some privacy?" She returned to her desk and begun packing up her things.

The tremors had subsided, and she'd only just noticed. She hadn't looked up but listened to the retreating steps of the three women.

When what was left of her door clicked shut, she released a breath.

"I'm sorry for that interruption, as you can see, I was about leaving for the day," She gestured to her bag. If indeed he'd been in a delusional state, he wouldn't have any memory of his actions. She might as well pick it up from before he'd lost 'consciousness'.

"Caught you just in time I guess," He made an attempt to sound optimistic. It wasn't working.

"If you chose to look at it like that," Lisa shrugged and shoved her phone into her bag. "Now tell me, what exactly brought you here this evening, Mr. Campbell?"

"She's missing," He buried his head in his hands. "I checked our hotel, her home in Portland…" He'd been to Portland? There was enough time. He'd just confirmed it. Enough time for a delusional Paul to commit the heinous crime and return to his Portland home. "The house sitter, Danielle is there, but she isn't and… God… she can't find out what I did, she'll leave me for good."

His thoughts, words were all over the place. He'd greatly recovered from his delusional episode, but that didn't mean he wasn't still hysterical.

She wouldn't be able to make a diagnosis if he didn't get a hold of his feelings. If he gave room to another episode, this time costing her life. She needed to keep him calm, collected. "Who is she? And if 'she' is missing,

I think it would be wise to put out a missing's person's report." She picked up and skimmed over the documents scattered on her desk and shoved them into her bag as well. "Or do you want to talk about what you did?"

He shook his head. Claire wasn't in any danger, he was. He was at risk of losing her. He couldn't imagine what he would do if he were to lose the woman, he'd been with for three-years of his life. "She's my fiancé, Claire Fisher. And I don't think she's in trouble, I… we got into a fight and I ignored her, and I thought she returned to Portland, but I drove there, and she wasn't there."

"Have you tried calling?"

"Of course, I have, but all I get is voicemail!" His voice boomed; she was startled by his outburst. Her fingers curled around her bag.

This couldn't be happening again.

His mood was all over the place. It wasn't enough to make a singular diagnosis.

However, combining what she knew from his last session with his episode, she was inclined to believe he could be suffering Manic Depression, though she would need more time to be firm on that decision.

She hadn't flinched despite being taken aback, rather she'd pinned him with a disapproving glare, one that egged him to reach into his pockets for his phone. His eyes widened and his lips had been pressed in a thin line.

He didn't bother with a response, rather pressed the phone against his ear, his expression blanked as he rose and let himself out of her office.

Her eyes fluttered shut and her lips parted in a sigh of relief.

Even though this was only the beginning.

Nenny May

CHAPTER SEVEN

The morning after…

He needed to speak with Lisa Patterson. He hadn't gotten much of an opportunity after blacking out in her office. After stirring, head heavy and lulled, tongue dry, a bile trapped in his throat to nurses grasping onto his arms, keeping him upright. He hadn't been able to utter a peep, he'd been waiting for his eyes to adapt to her sharply lit office.

He couldn't deny that hadn't been a fantasy of his, a fetish… it had. Waking to two naughty, scantily clothed nurses, arms wrapped around his, ready to do whatever it took to satisfy him…

Though he found it hard to believe the women fully clothed in scrubs that had dug their nails into him cared about his satisfaction. When they'd spoken, it sounded as though they were under water. Or maybe he was. He sure as hell felt like the time he'd almost drowned at Marine Park… or Elmore park, or whatever the place was called now. He wasn't sure what they intended to do to him, but Lisa Patterson had done everything in her power to get those nurses to unhand him despite the raw fear that had been etched on her creased features.

Dazed and confused, he hadn't known whether to thank her and reschedule their appointment or leave her be, she'd seemed… disgruntled. He'd been tempted to linger, to steady

his feet and ask why her eyes had begged for him to get the hell out her office. He'd racked his brain, forced it to tug on what had happened after he'd let himself into the Wellness Center. He remembered the drive, the walk past the front doors, up the stairs to the second floor and past the floor secretary's empty table. Everything afterwards was a smudge.

He didn't have it in him to return to Claire Fisher. To their hotel on 3rd Street. After making doughnuts around 9th Street and the 101 at fifty-five miles per hour, the night spreading its pitch-black wings over the small town, the moon peeking from behind sullen clouds, a fist running through Lisa Patterson's office wall replaying on reruns behind his eyes, he'd heard her brittle voice again. Not Lisa's. Claire's. Her words had jabbed through his strained recollections of his episode. The raw fear that had gripped him waking up in the tight embrace of two women in

scrubs was yet to pry its fingers out of his skin.

"I don't matter anymore, do I?" His eyes had leaped to where she'd been staring straight ahead, occupying the passenger seat. She hadn't bothered to put on her seatbelt this time. She'd become more courageous. It sparked a flame of resentment in him. This wasn't even how the real Claire Fisher acted. At least she had the decency to comport herself. This… thing his mind made up was nothing like his fiancé.

Why the hell couldn't she leave him be? Certainly, he'd cheated, trudged all they'd built through the mud and disrespected her, but was that enough for a fictional version to ride with him everywhere he went? To trail him like a shadow he couldn't help but loathe?

Anyone he told about the Claire Fisher he was seeing, talking to, would chuck him in the same loony-bin his mother was flung into. She

was pegged as crazy the minute she confided in someone, anyone that her husband was speaking to her from beyond the grave. Tillamook Times had been the first to carry the article. Local Skank Diagnosed With Schizophrenia. The shame that had washed over him couldn't be forgotten. She was ridiculed, shunned from society, forced to live a lonesome life in her Tillamook manor.

And what was worse, for a moment, he'd thought the same… That she was in dire need of an intervention. He'd spent his teenage years pleading with her to see someone, talk to someone…In his defense, she'd lugged around a picture frame. Brought it to the dinner table, to the living room, took it for walks down the street… No wonder they didn't have neighbors. No one wanted to live next to the woman who took portraits for a walk. He didn't have friends because whenever they

would come over, she would be with that damned portrait of his father, speaking to it as if it were real! He wasn't crazy. She was. The Detectives had been right about that even if he'd been too hardheaded to see it. Blake Campbell was crazy and that's probably what got her killed.

Why then had she been clothed in a wedding dress? Her wedding dress from all the wedding pictures with his father? Nothing about her death made sense. Nothing after her death made sense either.

He took his eyes off her and swerved nearly rearing the bumper of a Toyota Corolla. Sticking his hand out of the window, the driver of the navy-blue car let him know just how displeased he was by Paul's errant driving. "You don't. My fiancé does." He clenched his jaw. Is this what it had come to? He was talking to nothing… to a figment of his guilty mind. To the imaginary Claire Fisher his mind concocted in an attempt at

punishing him for his own wrongdoings. He'd cheated ergo the mental image of a heartbroken fiancé plaguing him. "You're in my head, you're not real."

He wasn't like his mother. She never once tried to fight the voice of his father… She'd listened to it, fed it and let it morph into something dark and sinister. He wasn't going to make the same mistake. He would get rid of the Claire Fisher he'd concocted…he just… didn't know how.

Pity and concern swirled in his gut. This was the woman he was going to marry. His other half, his forever. He couldn't face her. At least not yet. That night, he'd returned to American Angels. He didn't know where else to go. Susanne had been in the middle of a hell shift when he'd wandered through the doors. The crowd had been massive. Tables were occupied, booths as well. The bar had people seated and leaned over it.

Bodies thrashed and grinded against each other.

Music thumped; he could feel it on his skin. But he was tired, too tired to kick and shove his body around under the pretense of dancing the night away. His mother was murdered, he had an imaginary fiancé haunting him for cheating and the police department… he couldn't even get started on that matter. The detectives on his mother's case were confused and scatter brained. The man… Detective Dawson… was it? Had believed Paul had killed his mother… Why the hell would he kill her? Why in the bloody hell would he kill her?

"What are you looking at, Punk?" A man asked. He was tall, broad shoulders and beefy with an uncomfortable bleached beard. He'd been wearing a pair of sunglasses and carried around a little beard comb between the scratchy locks of hair on his face. Why had he worn sunglasses

in a dim bar? The man took quick steps towards Paul by the entrance.

"Hit him," Claire urged. He hadn't glanced at her, but he could hear her over his shoulder. He could feel her warm breath on the back of his neck, the hairs at his nape standing on end.

Tilting his head, Paul glanced over the man's attire. He didn't dress like a local that was for sure. The skin tight jeans paired with the checkered shirt and boots… It wailed Texas cowboy. Perhaps the man had wandered into the small town by accident? Tillamook locals were casual jeans and at best a plain T. Taking things a little over the top, they were leather jackets. Flannels weren't selling all that well. He tried to side step the man oozing of one too many shots under Susanne's voluptuous influence.

He needed to speak with her, to get her to swear to secrecy. What they'd done was a mistake. He needed

to alleviate the guilt that manifested the imaginary woman that pursued him relentlessly.

An arm curled around his. It was reflex, the way his fist had connected with the man's jaw… Only it felt more like a thin flakey wall… he couldn't get that image out of his head… had he done that? Was that why Lisa Patterson's features had been distorted with fear? Drawing back, he glared at his quivering fist. His eyes flickered to the man; blood ran down his busted lip. He'd fallen to the floor, glaring up at a startled Paul. He didn't have a drop of blood on his hand. His heart jackhammered in his chest. Dust. He unclenched his fist. Dust rained down his knuckle.

Something wasn't right. He couldn't get his breath to his lungs. Who the hell was that man? Paul wiped his hands down on his pant leg.

"Are you deaf or something?" Susanne was agitated. "I said come with me." She tugged him to the back

of the bar through a door marked employees only and up a flight of stairs. “My dad isn’t home so; you can stay here tonight.” She rummaged through her apron for what he assumed to be the keys. How had his hands been covered with dust and wooden residue when the man’s lips bled? He’d seen the blood… hadn’t he? “You’re causing too much of a ruckus,” She pushed open the door and pulled him in. Flicking on the light, she turned, on her way out the way she’d come. She paused. “Stay here, get cleaned up and be out by before noon.”

“You’re not going to stay?” His eyebrows dipped. What in God’s name was he doing? He was meant to stay away from her, not recall the feeling of her warm skin against his… He’d returned to her, not to continue where they left off… although the idea was enticing, he’d driven all the way over because he needed to put an end to what he started. He needed to

make sure Claire Fisher two-point-zero didn't manifest out of nowhere again.

"Look, Paul, what we did last time you were here… it was fun… it was…everything I could ask for… but it was a mistake." She searched his eyes. He nodded.

"Yeah, of course." He scratched the back of his head. "Goodnight, Susanne, and… thanks," She smiled.

Shutting the door, he'd been left to his own thoughts. Nothing good ever came from that.

The room she'd left him was an apartment, a loft. He assumed it belonged to her father. Who was her father anyway? The walls were a shade of blue that was unsettling to Paul. The couch was grey, stained with what he could only accept to be ketchup. The coffee table scattered with an abandoned mug and a day-old newspaper, was made from the same walnut that ran over the walls of American Angels. The television in

the corner was off. The kitchen sink was overflowing with dishes. The countertops scattered with cereal boxes. He couldn't see the room from where he was standing, he would need to climb up the stairs, but he could bet it would parallel the rest of the home.

He didn't have the eagerness to embark on that adventure. He needed to speak with Lisa Patterson. He wasn't content with the way they'd left things. She was after all the only one he knew that wouldn't judge him. She wouldn't see him as a killer the way Detective Dawson did. She wouldn't chuck him into some psychiatric ward if he were to confide in her… would she?

He wouldn't fit in at a ward. He wasn't like the others; he wasn't psychotic or sociopathic. He didn't have dangerous tendencies like the others. He was in control of his own mind... He glanced at Claire over his shoulder. She'd been leaned over the couch, skimpily clothed in that red

dress of hers he liked so much, the one that cupped her ass perfectly… Semi-control of his mind for what it was worth. People in a ward were beyond rescue. He wasn't at rock bottom… yet. He just had a little hiccup. Lisa could do something. She could help him get rid of the guilt he felt. It was guilt wasn't it?

If it wasn't guilt, could it have been regret? He joined her on the couch, eyes fluttered shut, legs raised and balanced on the walnut coffee table. He'd never been able to draw the line between the two. Guilt was a warm discomforting feeling, like a heartburn that just didn't let up. Regret was similar, both kept him up till the sun roused from its slumber thinking he shouldn't have done it. He should have fought his impulses. He shouldn't have gone all the way with Susanne.

And even after, he shouldn't have wasted all that gas driving down to Portland. Danielle, their house sitter

and one of Claire's students was yet to see Claire. In fact, she'd been convinced Claire was with him. It took him a whole minute to understand that she meant at Tillamook and not leaned over his shoulder. His fiancé hadn't been to their home in Portland. She hadn't left Tillamook. She was right to evade him. He wasn't the right man for her, she deserved better.

"Have you even considered that I might be able to forgive you?" He chuckled, his eyes prying apart. He took in the deadpan expression on her face. She wasn't kidding. In the glare of the morning sun, she radiated, there was a certain realism in her eyes… her skin was as detailed as Claire's. Almost as if he could reach out and…

He flinched; his skin tingled. He shook his head. She wasn't real. He didn't know how his head was doing this, but she wasn't real. For Gods sakes, she was a figment of his imagination.

“How many times are you going to tell yourself that till you realize I’m here to stay? It’s getting pathetic.” She rose to her feet irked.

That morning made four days without proper sleep. It had to be taking a toll on him he didn’t doubt it. That had to be why she’d become more vivid, more… real. But he just didn’t know how he was going to convince his body to delete her. She needed to leave.

And then it hit him. He knew just how he would get rid of Claire Fisher.

He would get rid of the source of his guilt.

He would get rid of Susanne Ellison.

Nothing could have prepared Claire Fisher for the hell that was Tillamook. If she’d known this was what the trip had in store, she wouldn’t have tagged along with Paul.

He hadn't even asked her to accompany him. She'd merely followed. Joined him at the Portland Airport and picked up an over-the-counter ticket.

She didn't think she had it in her to let him leave on his own. She wasn't codependent. She couldn't just let him after he'd caught wind of his mother's murder. The guilt of letting him walk into it on his own would have eaten her up from the inside out. Though, if the tables were turned, she wouldn't have made that out of the blue call to the University of Portland telling them that she wouldn't be able to turn in for the next few days. She wouldn't have made that last call to Danielle begging her best student and only real friend to house sit before boarding their night flight.

She'd been there in a new town less than a week and it was nightmare. She knew next to nothing about the place, she didn't know anywhere else aside her hotel, she'd risked her career

and her freedom to threaten a woman she was convinced had a part to play in her mother-in-law-to-be's death.

She was on her last penny and her fiancé was missing.

She glanced over her shoulder at the man behind the front window. He didn't for a moment glance up at her. How long had she been waiting since she'd returned the document he handed to her? A minute? Ten? Everything had blurred into a rattled thought.

She'd fallen into a sequence, glaring at her watch, at the slow ticking hands of the clock, glancing at the window and then rummaging through her bag for her phone, checking it for calls or messages and shoving it back.

She hadn't let the phone slip from her fingers and into the darkness of her bag when it vibrated against her. She heaved it, her heart hammering in her chest.

Her shoulders fell. It wasn't Paul.

She swiped the screen.

"This isn't the best time, Jay," She glared at her watch and then at the window.

"What's wrong?" She was in an ornery mood that's what.

"It's Paul," She said instead.

"What that Doushebag do this time?" She knew her elder brother's words were born from a sincere concern. He knew Paul all too well. He'd known him in is player days, when women were mere pawns in a game. And he'd never been able to chance his perception of him even though she'd promised him Paul had changed.

Their wedding was supposed to be an opportunity to prove to Jay and his twin Alex that Paul loved her and only her. He wasn't a bad guy. He had a bad reputation, but his heart was pure.

"He hasn't come back, Jay." The words were heavy on her tongue.

“I will kill that man if he was with another woman.” She shook her head even if he couldn’t see her.

“It’s not like that. I think something bad could have happened.”

“Stop.” Jay scolded almost immediately. “You always assume the worst, Claire. Take a breath and relax.”

“You don’t get it,” Her breathing was hard.

“No, you don’t. Didn’t you say his mother died, he’s probably grieving, somewhere.”

“That’s just it. She didn’t just die; she was murdered and I’m scared whoever went after her got their hands on him too.” She drummed her fingers on her lap.

“Get out of that town, Claire.” His response was almost automatic. “Get out or I’m driving down there to pick you up.” Jay wasn’t in New Delhi with their parents. He was in Portland. He’d taken up a job as a Pharmacist in Target by Sw Woods Street.

"This is why I couldn't tell you what happened."

"Because you knew I wouldn't let you get tangled in a family they were murdering one by one." He wasn't going to listen to reason. He was stubborn. But that made two of them.

"He needs me, Jay." She clipped.

"Bullshit. I need you alive, we all do; Krisha, Rebecca, and Mayra, Alex…" He paused. There was shuffling at the other end of the line and the jingle of keys.

"Humour me, Jay when was the last time Rebecca called? On my birthday? Is that someone that needs me? And Krisha just had a baby, she's too busy for me." What was she saying? He was blowing all of this out of proportion. She wasn't in any real danger… was she? She'd never taken a moment to think. Everything since that plane ride had been a rollercoaster.

"It doesn't bloody matter, Claire. Get back here, I will cover the cost of

your plane ticket. But don't poke your nose where it doesn't belong."

After what felt like eons, the man behind the window rose his head of dark hair. "Miss. Fisher?" She stood on unsteady feet. She had taken the closest chair to the window, and yet, it felt like miles. The white walls seemed to be closing in on her. She wasn't one to break down and wallow helplessly. She'd never been helpless before. She'd always been that fierce woman who didn't let anything bring her to her knees. But if her swollen reddened eyes and drained stained cheeks were any indication, she'd lost that battle. "Whatever you're about to do, Claire, it's not too late to stop it. Come back," Jay wailed from the other end of the line. She loved Paul. She knew him. He wouldn't just up and leave her because they'd had a fall-out. He wouldn't ignore her calls. Her messages. He wasn't like that. Though she was willing to convince herself that he'd changed for the

worst all in a bid to keep the aching dread of her rambling thoughts at bay. How was she to listen to her own fears? It persuaded her to believe someone had kidnaped her fiancé. His mother had been murdered, who was to say the killer hadn't gone after him as well?

"I have to go, Jay." She shut off her phone shoving it back into her bag.

"We will take your statement." A woman said. Where had she come from?

Claire gathered her belongings and followed the uniformed cadet. The room she'd been taken to was small, reeked of old socks and the walls matched every other one in the building—white. The City Police Department was in dire need of color to splash up the place. Irrespective of the American flags they'd shoved in the corner, of the foyer, Claire was thinking along the lines of potted plants, paintings. Anything to bring

the rooms to life. Hell, even a shimmering clock would have done the trick. She wouldn't even mind a grandfather one.

She hadn't known who else to tell about Paul Campbell. She had to file a missing person's report. The sooner the better. If someone had taken him from her, she wanted to get him back. She wanted to find her fiancé alive. She craved an end to the heartache and drama this town had beneath its cozy outlook.

She sat at a square metal table with a thud, counting her breaths, the legs of her chair screeching the against the floorboards. She tapped her fingers against the metal table waiting for the cadet to settle in across from her.

Paul was fine. Wherever he was, he had to be fine… he just had to.

The woman sat; a file open before her. "You filed a missing person's report?" Claire nodded. "Can you relay what happened the day your

fiancé vanished?" She nibbled on her bottom lip. Could she even remember what had happened? It was all a haze. They'd fought the night before. A small one. He'd given her the cold shoulder and he'd just never came home. None of that mattered now, the fight, the anger she'd felt when he'd lashed out. Nothing concerned her, she just needed him back. Whatever it took.

"We fought," She forced. Her hands tightened into fists beneath the table. A tear ran down her cheek. "It was over his mother, she just died. And… he's only been missing two nights but you have to understand how she died."

"How did she die?" The woman leaned forward in her seat.

"She was stabbed ten times and strangled to death in her Miller Avenue home."

If the woman was startled, she did a good job remaining collected.

"Okay, and can you tell me where he was last seen?"

"Leaving our hotel on 3rd Street." Her body went cold with dread.

"And other than you, his fiancé, does he have any next of kin? Family members? Neighbors that could help broaden the search party?" She shook her head.

She was all he had left.

Lisa Patterson had only been seated five minutes when the door to Mocha on the Rocks was tugged upon. The petite café was alive with overhead lights and the chirpy morning sun spilling into the room. Tables and chairs were occupied with busy bees, fingers dancing over keyboards, pens gliding over paper. If there was one thing Lisa adored about Tillamook it was how hardworking the people were. It wasn't even 10:00

A.M. and people were out hustling and bustling for their morning joe, prepping for that online presentation or drafting up some report to turn in at the office.

Regan Sinclair shrugged off her ankle length coat and slung it over her arm. Lisa waved the lean woman over with a smile she hoped wasn't too cheeky. She had settled on a table in the middle of the café. It was the best spot in her definition that wasn't too close to the window and wasn't too far from the air conditioner. The cool air still caressed her bare arms. Adorned in a sleeveless button-down blouse, she savored the cool air, letting it work spectacles on her spiked temperature.

Indeed, it was a table for four, but the extra chairs were a space to keep her things. She hadn't brought too much along, a bag a coat and a thick spined book on the Unconscious Mind.

She didn't welcome early outings on her busiest days. That wasn't something she was used to. She knew what her clients could get like if she wasn't behind her desk awaiting them. Especially after she'd responded to their morning calls, assuring them that she would be there. She didn't appreciate the reviews they would leave. The words they would use to describe her. She didn't need to give the board a reason to duck her pay. Lord knew they were combing for any opportunity to do so.

However, when Regan Sinclair had explained over the phone that she was not only done with the contract, but she needed someone to confide in about the Campbell murder investigation, Lisa Patterson had lunged at the offer. One bad review from Jessica Stanford, her 9:00 A.M. wouldn't hurt her career and reputation too much.

"Sorry I'm late," Regan set her belongings down on an empty chair at

the table. Jasmine and Cinnamon were Regan's signature scent and Lisa Patterson's muscles tensed. "There was a hold up on Laurel Avenue." She sat and drew her bag onto her lap. Lisa had heard about that on the radio. Apparently, Channel Six was hosting a gala to celebrate becoming the go-to news station. "You weren't waiting too long, were you?" Lisa shook her head. Regan tugged out a freshly printed thick booklet. Her eyes twinkled. "Here you go, I would advise you take your time and read through it. But…" Lisa clutched the warm agreement in her quivering hands, her grin broad. It was heavy. She tussled the urge to reach out and pull the woman into her embrace. They didn't know each other that well.

Her stomach was alive with butterflies at the possibility of being that close to Regan. For God's sakes it was taking everything Lisa had not to let her tongue hang out.

She didn't know when she would get the chance to flip through each page, but she knew she didn't have a choice. "You're doing this for the wrong reasons, Lisa." She lifted an eyebrow. Her stomach knotted.

That was the thing about affection that Lisa Patterson loathed. She cared too damn much about what the other person had to say.

"What do you mean?" She clutched the document firmly. She'd kept her tone brusque, flat.

"Paul isn't your guy. He might have had motive, and opportunity… but he's not Blake's killer." Lisa Patterson tilted her head and huffed.

"And what do you think his motive was?" Lisa seemed genuinely curious.

Regan Sinclair studied Lisa, the way her full lips had been set in a hard line, jaw tightened. She hadn't intended to put her on edge. If anything, she was only looking out for her. Protecting her from digging an

empty grave. “I understand the opportunity. It was his house, he’d grown up there, he had access to the home… My question is what his motive could be? And I see you’ve put two and two together drafting this up for me, so… save me the time and tell me what the District Attorney of Tillamook thinks Paul Campbell’s motive is for murdering his mother.”

Lisa dreaded to admit it, but she wasn’t comfortable with the way she felt in the presence of Regan Sinclair. She felt helpless, agitated, she was hormonal and filled with hope for what she knew would never be and couldn’t help but snap at nearly everything the woman had to say.

She was being unnecessarily difficult. She could have given her the benefit of the doubt, she could have taken a breath, waited before she’d reacted. But this was a difficult topic… No, her feelings were making things that much harder. A woman had been killed, quite horridly in her

Tillamook home… She could bet discussing the matter with anyone else would have gone smother than it was currently. For one, she wouldn't be besieged with fantasies of disrobing the person she was conversing with.

She was however worried there was a slim chance she could have been compensating for the fact that Stuart Middleton was frolicking in a field of gullible ears. She resisted the urge to shake her head. This was different. Stuart's desire to relish in the praise of his colleagues didn't drive her actions, or in this case, reaction. It burdened her, more than she was willing to admit. He was a fraud, but it wasn't the reason she'd lashed out on Regan Sinclair.

A woman approached their table. Lisa recognized her instinctively. She'd recently been interviewed on Channel Six. She was the woman that had seen Blake Campbell displaying signs of schizophrenia. "Welcome to Mocha on the Rocks, I'm Gina Laval,

may I take your order?" The woman had a pen and a notepad in hand.

"It's so nice to meet you," Lisa placed the contract on the table and reached out a hand to shake Gina's. The woman's hands though lean and frail were firm to shake. "I enjoyed your segment on Behind the Body with Channel Six, and I was wondering… why didn't you talk to her, you knew she was going through something, you could have… helped… couldn't you?" Lisa didn't mean for her words to tumble out in a harsh manner. But they had. If she'd had the opportunity to speak with Blake at the time, she would have gotten the woman the therapy she deserved. She didn't believe there were patients who couldn't be saved. To Lisa Patterson, everyone could be saved from their own mental captivity, even if they seemed too far gone… it was a matter of time, effort, and applying the right techniques to bring them back.

"Excuse me?" The woman glanced her up and down, sizing her up, her face contorted into something dark, a vein popped out in her neck.

"I'm sorry… forget what I said, I'll have a mocha latte. And my friend would have…" She turned to Regan who'd been occupied by the phone in her hands. She didn't value Regan's dependence on that thing. When people were out, phones were supposed to be secondary, they ought to live in the moment and not glimpse at their phones whenever they got the opportunity.

"A black coffee, please." Regan finally said. The woman nodded, scowled at Lisa, but turned and walked over to the counter. That woman was going to spit in Lisa's coffee she could guarantee it.

"You're his psychologist, Lisa. You better than anyone know why he would have killed her. If you didn't you wouldn't have sought my intervention." Lisa shook her head.

"I didn't seek your intervention, Sinclair. Don't get it twisted. Hell, I have searched heaven and earth and I can't find where I asked for your opinion." Lisa snapped. This wasn't going to work… Collaborating with Regan was going to get messy, complicated… difficult. Nothing in her life had been difficult since graduating with a degree in psychology.

Regan Sinclair faked a smile.

"I didn't come here to fight with you, Lisa. I came because I could use someone to… confide in about this case… or at least what I found." She rubbed her temples. The woman's breathing was strained. Lisa took note of the darkened bags beneath her eyes, the tremble in her lips.

"What did you find, and how does it have anything to do with my sessions with Paul Campbell?" Lisa scratched her nose, glaring skeptically at the District Attorney.

"Paul Campbell isn't the killer you're after, Lisa. Bernard Sutter is. He had a motive; an opportunity and I know for a fact it was his shirt that was uncovered from the scene of the crime."

Lisa Patterson's eyes blazed with apprehension; her espresso skin flushed and pulse thumping in her ears. "Please, help me understand why you believe the Governor of Tillamook killed a local prostitute." It didn't add up. What would a man that lived and worked in Salem have to gain killing a Tillamook prostitute? Had her services been that bad? And even at that, why result to stabbing her ten times in the torso and strangling her to death in her Tillamook home?

"He was a client of hers… she was going to destroy his marriage… I have proof…" She pulled out her phone and slid it across the table. Lisa reached for it. On the screen were screenshots of messages from a

number registered as ‘Client-One’. Scrolling through the images, Blake Campbell had a rocky relationship with this number. And right on the nail, there were ceaseless instances where Blake had referred to the number as Bernard. The fights they’d gotten into were countless. And even still, he’d requested Blake Campbell adorn her wedding dress for their next session. The last message received had been a short one.

‘On my way.’. Sent less than thirty minutes before her murder.

Paul Campbell didn’t kill his mother. Governor Bernard Sutter did.

“We have to get this to the Sherriff’s Department.” Lisa Patterson suggested returning Regan’s phone. She blew out a nervous breath. It all became clear. Her desire to ruin Paul. He wasn’t her target. She deflecting her negative emotions towards what had happened to his mother. She was pushing it onto him,

convincing herself that he'd had a part to play.

He didn't. That only meant he needed her services. And this contract was the beginning of an opportunity. Not to take him down for the murder of his mother, but to rescue him from the metal cuffs of grief. From the trauma of a drastic loss. She would be helping the son of a murder victim.

Regan nodded. "I spoke to the Detective in charge of the case, she's not going to be at the precinct, but at the gala on Laurel Avenue." Lisa considered the heavy traffic in that part of town. If they left immediately, they would be able to make it before noon.

She didn't leap from her seat.

"Can we get in?" Lisa didn't bother a glance at her outfit. She had on work attire. If the event was strict on its dress code, they would be shunned at the entrance.

"Being the District Attorney of the small town has it's perks. I'll drive."

A phone blared; it was faint in the distance. It was picked up as quickly as it rang. The precinct on long prairie road hummed with an early morning zeal that Detective Rachel Olson had to admit was infectious. She didn't get that every Thursday morning. Especially when she left the house ten minutes earlier than normal. But then again, it wasn't every Thursday morning she got dolled up to accompany a man she'd almost kissed for a gala to support his sister.

Long prairie hadn't been her first stop. It wasn't her final stop either. Tillamook Junior High had been her first. For a high school operating a semester in the middle of autumn, it was full, to say the least. Bodies had been leaned against cars in the parking lot, a sea of students in their

hundreds gushed toward the front entrance. Rachel Olson hadn't been dressed applicably. Tuscany had pleaded for Rachel to take her in Betty, excited that for once her cop neighbor had thrown on a dress for the first time. Rachel didn't have a problem giving Tuscany a ride anywhere, she did however squirm in the driver's seat each time the fourteen-year-old insisted on referring to her by her first name, Naomi in the presence of her school friends.

It was one thing for Tuscany to call her by the name Cecilia-Jackson-Brown had called her growing up. It was another for complete strangers to butcher the name in a bid to thank her for driving the best car that morning. There was nothing wrong with the name, Naomi…it just brought to mind her mother who'd been brutally murdered.

She'd as well stopped for gas and a coffee and managed to make it into the office before eleven-thirty. She

gulped a lung full of the early morning and put on a sincere smile that matched the warmth she felt in the pit of her stomach.

Cadets had been darting from door to door, forensics investigators crawled the ground floor—an open space of cubicles, a stubborn vending machine, and a questionable water cooler—and even the morgue attendants had been clustered by the door to Crime Scene Technician Janice Lee's office. She would eventually need to speak with Janice, but she didn't think she had the time that morning.

She was early, that didn't mean she didn't have a packed schedule.

Up the stairs, in a pair of shimmering Bottega Veneta strappy sandals, three doors down from the ladies' room, she poked her head into his office, the cedar door had been ajar. She hadn't bothered to knock. "Got a minute I could borrow, Woods?"

The marshmallow-skinned man with reflective eyes cleared his throat.

Evidence Technician Steve Woods perched by his table, leaned against it, hadn't looked up from the files sprawled on it.

A dead silence settled in between them and Detective Olson shifted her weight between her feet, and allowed herself to gather her scattered thoughts.

Her memories of last night. It all felt… surreal… Beneath the sprinkled stars, on the shores of Cape Lookout, her lips had brushed against Chase Dawson's. They'd had a moment, an almost kiss. Her stomach fluttered; lips drawn between her teeth. She couldn't forget the night she and Dawson shared.

Rachel swallowed, pushing that night to the back of her mind, especially since she would have to spend her morning at some gala on 7th Street with him as his plus one.

"I was able to bypass her pin code," Steve Woods rippled her thoughts. She blinked. He'd moved. He was by a drawer, pulling it open. He reached inside and produced a familiar object. "It was her late husband's birthday, how predictable." Rachel shrugged and picked up the Ziplock bag.

"Yes, that year in MIT is really paying off." She had forced a faint smile. She swiped the screen, compulsively opening the gallery app. Anything to help her retrace their victim's last steps. There were pictures of the 9th, pictures of the day she'd died. And from the looks of things, pictures taken hours before her passing.

"Hurtful. You couldn't do it," She nodded. That was true. The wedding dress had been her own decision it seems… She closed the app and opened the messaging app. She couldn't evade it. The tingling feeling

that plagued her skin as messages flooded the screen.

"Anything I should be concerned about on it?" She nodded for him to walk with her. He did and she led the way out of his office. Her mouth had become a desert. She couldn't stop glancing at the phone. The woman had a surge of messages from her service provider and only one from someone she'd saved as 'client five'.

"What makes you think I went through the phone?" Even from his high-pitched and cracked tone, she could tell he was lying. He wasn't a good liar, but he sure as hell was a good Evidence Technician.

"You expect me to believe you had the smart phone of a fifty-six-year-old dead hooker and you didn't go through it?" She jogged down the stairs and quick on her heel-clad feet, made her way across the ground floor.

"Wait, hooker?"

"It's all over channel nine. Apparently, it was how she was able

to escape the mortgage on her house on Miller Avenue." She weaved through the Cadets dashing from their cubicle.

"Shit."

"So, what's on her phone." She stopped by a door and handed him the Ziplock.

"Calls. Eight of them made on the day of the murder, three of which were made the night of her passing." He placed the bagged phone in his blazer.

"And?"

"I gave a few of these numbers a ring myself and it just now makes sense why many of them were old local men in the area."

"Wait local men? With a house like that I figured she would go for the big leagues," She had her hands on the door handle. She had to cut her conversation with Woods short. This was her twelve P.M.

"I don't know but one of them worked at a maid agency,"

"We know about Maids for Tillamook; I'm supposed to meet with their founder in a little bit." She said curtly. "Got anything else for me?"

"One of the calls had been made from a burner phone."

That had to be their killer.

"Get me everything there is to know about that burner phone."

Rachel let herself into the petite moss green room. It didn't have much to offer. It was a small room the color of dead moss green, a metal table sat in the middle with three chairs tucked in in it. A camera sat over the door, often to record the interrogation sessions. A two-way mirror had been hung at the farthest end of the room. There was one thing, the room had that it didn't have any other day.

"She went around," The gruff baritone of his voice was music to her ears. She bit back the impulsive urge to let her lips twitch into a subtle smile. She was glad for her amber

skin. It couldn't tint pink and unveil her emotions.

She lifted her chin. There was a tight well-done knot in her stomach. She rubbed the moisture from her palms on her flowing Cinderella Divine satin A-line dress, agitated at the streak it left behind. That hadn't been a cheap dress. A compulsive buy, but an expensive one. She didn't have anything that screamed gala, and she didn't think she had it in her to turn up in something old and tacky or worse… work-related. No. Shortly after leaving the precinct, she'd ducked into a few clothing stores, tried on a few pencil dresses that didn't do much for her rather curvy figure… That was until as the sun had been saying its final goodbye, her jar of hope completely run dry, she tried one more store by the Tillamook Mall's exit door. It had caught her eye the moment she'd slipped through the wide opened glass doors. The mannequin that wore it was as

voluptuous as she was and she knew she couldn't leave that store without that dress. It featured a cowl neckline with tying thin straps, a leg slit, and a flowing A-line skirt.

"Huh?" Since Mathew, she'd repelled advances from countless men… That's to say, going out of her way and well beyond her budget to buy a dress for a date had always been out of the question. The same rules didn't seem to apply with Detective Dawson… Not that he was making any advances that she had to repel.

"The walls," He rose a finger towards the door. "They're paper thin. Might want to get Pierce in on that, this isn't the best place to be speaking to our witnesses,"

She internally winced. She'd overlooked the reports, the complaints from Cadets who'd used the interrogation room. She was supposed to have gotten the documents to Pierce's table since Leona Wendy's case… Shit!

She fiddled with a lock of curled hair. She'd worn her hair all-natural, a style that didn't exactly work with the dress of choice. In its natural state, Rachel Olson's hair was a bed of untamed sable type-three-c curls. It resembled that of Madeline-Pettis, but inches longer. The curls were a gift from her mothers' strong traits, as well as the soil-brown eyes accented with a cat-eye liner and a nude shimmering ombre shadow.

"Wasn't able to get any sleep last night, so I looked into our Jane Doe." Had he been burdened by the night they'd shared? Had he been looking forward to the gala? She couldn't help the mental image of an almost naked Chase Dawson in bed tossing and turning beneath the silk sheets…did he have silk sheets? Or was he more of a duvet guy? "By her forties, she'd slept with a good portion of Tillamook's big leagues and in her fifties, well…" Detective Dawson trailed off. He hadn't been sitting at

the metal table in the middle of the room. He was much too jumpy to settle into a chair in the empty room. He'd been perched by the two-way window, hands shoved in his pockets. He'd thrown on a three-piece Gianni Ice Blue Slim-Fit Suit. A bulky frost-white watch was peeking out of the sleeve on his left hand. Her temperature jerked; her heart was a wild animal trying to escape her chest.

"There was no one else to sleep with besides the locals." Detective Olson finished for him recalling what Steve Woods had mentioned about the numbers their deceased had called.

"Bingo," He nodded. He approached her in countable steady steps. She calculated her breaths. Her amber skin might shield her from tinting in her cheeks, but it could do little against flushing in her skin. "And where are my manners," His voice dropped an octave. He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. For the love of all things sweet, she

wished her hands hadn't clammed up at his proximity. "You look breathtaking, Miss. Olson." The way her name rolled off his tongue nearly made her weak-kneed. At nearly thirty-three, she was turning into near mush for her colleague, her work partner… what did that say of her?

"Naomi," She'd told him unsteadily. "I never did mention last night… I never got the chance to. But my mom… Cecilia, she always called me Naomi, all the time… it's actually my first name and when she died, I didn't want anyone calling me that. Although my fourteen-year-old neighbor Tuscany is convinced the name suits me better…" She babbled fighting the urge to pull away and cower. "I guess what I'm saying is, I want you to be able to call me that." Even Tuscany didn't find it this hard talking to the boys in her grade. She wanted to chuck it up to being rusty. She'd been out of the game since the divorce. It wasn't her fault.

Mathew had called her Naomi once. He hadn't been a big fan of the name. He'd always preferred Rachel. But then again, he preferred her hair straightened, pressed, and neat. Presentable, he'd called it.

"Well, your neighbor is pretty darn smart. It does suit you," Detective Dawson said, and... had that been respect she'd picked up in his tone? She wasn't sure. "What does it mean?"

"Pleasant one." She paused, chuckled to herself, and added; "Ironic, isn't it?" He shook his head.

"It's perfect." She beamed. She didn't want to admit it, but she'd been looking forward to the gala. She hadn't been up tossing and turning. No, she'd been on her computer… and not willing to fess up, she'd been researching etiquette for events of this manner. The last she needed was to eat like a slob and get him kicked out of his sister's event.

"Shall we?" Did he even need to ask? Nothing about her morning felt real… She was doing it; she was going on a date with Detective Dawson. Nodding, she allowed him to guide her out of the petite interrogation room, through the open space of cubicles, past the front entrance, and towards his Yukon.

If only she'd anticipated that this wasn't any ordinary gala.

The event center on 7th Street by Laurel Avenue had been renovated to a room of rounded tables, red carpets, and fog crawling up to the ankles. It was dark, rays of orange lights dancing from the stage, the walls curtained like a cinema, but lit up by vertically slanting ceiling lights. Each table had a candle in the middle. The décor was classy, the tables numbered. The ones closest to the stage were reserved, dressed in the Studio's brand colors of orange with

black borders instead of the default white that had adorned every other table from the entrance.

She hadn't kept count, but there had to be a few hundred tables in the room. It wasn't a small room.

Music blared, something slow, passionate from the speakers strategically positioned. She could hardly hear herself think.

Annabelle Dawson though she didn't have it in her to let a tear run down her makeup-caked-cheeks, she did let a sniffle through. Her hand in Amanda's, she'd let the man in the white button-down from the entrance guide them across the room. They were early enough that the event hadn't started without them, however, from the looks of things, it seemed they were cutting it pretty close. The tables had been occupied, only a few were left vacant. She was in complete awe at the effort and time that went into setting up the gala for the studio. She couldn't imagine how much

Channel Six had invested into that morning. She'd stopped at an orange table. This had to be one of the best tables in the room. She was light-headed. How had she made it to this point? If anyone had told her in college this was the direction her life would turn, she would have shrugged them off. What was an engineering student doing as a reporter at a gala thrown in honor of her efforts to the studio? Though she wasn't mentioned, she was a hands-on reason for the event and she couldn't contain her smile. Would she be dining with Simon Neil? She couldn't wait to see the look on his face!

"You look happy," Amanda acknowledged pulling out a seat and with a slight effort, lowering herself into it. She'd slipped into a glimmering midnight blue mermaid dress that accentuated her sharp curves. When Annabelle had arrived at Amanda's earlier that morning, her friend had still been hopping around

her home with one leg in a Saint Lauren ankle clasp sandal and her dress unzipped. She'd been instructing the babysitter on how best to handle her kids till she returned.

"We made it, Amanda…" Annabelle joined her friend by the table. Her own lose fitting wine-red tulle dress by Alexandre Vauthier was easy to move about in. It had been a gift from her mother Brenda Dawson before Annabelle and Chase had embarked on a timeless journey to a new town, a small town in pursuit of nothing and everything Tillamook had to offer. She'd brought the dress along, not particularly knowing when it would come in handy. She couldn't have been more thankful she hadn't left it behind on her twin bed in her parents' home in Los Angeles.

She couldn't wait for Chase to arrive. She hadn't seen him in days. She could only picture this Detective he'd couldn't seem to stop talking about. The last she'd been to his place

on 9th Street by Coastville Park, he'd gone on and on about how invested the woman was on their latest case. The way he'd spoken about her, Annabelle knew this was more than a work partner. His eyes had blazed with adoration she hadn't seen in a long time. Chase wasn't a slacker at anything he did, and Annabelle was beyond ecstatic that he'd met someone that mirrored his enthusiasm. He didn't always show it, but beyond his sarcastic wall of egotistical comments, he was a sweet boy with a heart of gold and she could only hope with her fingers crossed that the woman he couldn't get out of his mind wouldn't give him a reason to lose the spark that made him who he was.

"I can't take even half of the praise." There was a sincere adoration in Amanda's voice. Annabelle couldn't miss it. "You're the reason for this, don't cheat yourself from it. It was your idea to retrace the victim's

steps. You rallied Frank and I off our butts, you made this happen, Dawson."

She rose her head, lips wobbling. She couldn't let that stubborn tear slip. Her breathing steadied.

"Thank you," She scooched closer to Amanda and pulled her into a hug. It had been years since she'd had someone openly praise her for her hard work. Sure, there was Chase, but he didn't count. He was her brother, her blood, he was always going to praise her.

She only wished Frank could have come along. Now more than ever, she wanted her team back together. She couldn't eat her cake and have it.

The chairs at her table were drawn and Simon Neil, pursued by three other members of Channel Six's board of directors joined her and Amanda.

"You would not imagine the hold up on Laurel Avenue this morning, cars lined every side of the damn

street.” Casting Director Kelly Sullivan said. She was a lean woman with alabaster skin and faux blonde hair. She’d thrown on an over-the-top halter ruffles hem-high slit evening dress. She’d taken the seat closest to Annabelle Dawson, leaving Simon Neil to take the one opposite the reporter whose story had earned the studio the opportunity to celebrate.

Annabelle wondered if they were going to call her out and nominate her as one of the studio’s brightest minds? She couldn’t deny it any longer, she deserved it. Certainly, in the beginning, she’d been sitting on her butt, days from being flung from the only job she’d known in this small town, but now… things had changed. She had changed, she worked harder, smarter and she deserved to be named the studio's brightest mind!

“You’re telling me, I drove here in my Mercedes and some idiot pulling out nearly reared me.” Jack Carlton, the Studio Director said.

He’d occupied the seat by Amanda. He was about Annabelle’s age. He’d adorned a plain suit, from the looks of it, it was Armani. She’d never met him personally, but she’d heard from Frank, the thirty-year-old had gotten to his position through his father’s influence. His father, George Carlton, the owner of the Studio founded in May of 1992 hadn’t been present for the gala… She hadn’t intended to believe what Frank had whispered about the elderly George, but in his absence, she was finding it less difficult to believe.

According to Frank, the man was on his death bed, he’d been strapped there by an STD, a present from one too many illicit affairs.

“Guys, let’s focus on why we’re all here today.” Annabelle straightened in her seat at Simon Neil’s words. Was he going to brag about her in the presence of his team? She wriggled her hands beneath the table. Amanda turned to her. It was

subtle, the way the woman had reached for Annabelle's hand, the one closest to her. She gave it an encouraging squeeze. Simon Neil boasting about her would mean as much as a being named Brightest Mind! "Our collective efforts in this studio. No particular member got us her, but we did it because we worked as a team and we deserve this gathering." Her shoulders fell. She could feel Amanda's eyes on her. Her face was haggard with worry.

Annabelle rose to her feet. "Annabelle wait!" Amanda called after her. She didn't have it in her to return to that table. She was the reason for that gathering. SHE! Not anyone else. She couldn't deny that if Simon Neil hadn't pushed her, she wouldn't have thought out of the box, but she had! And she deserved to be recognized in the presence of the board.

A hand wrapped around her wrist. She whirled, about ready for the man

or woman behind her to meet her knuckles. “Woah, where’s the golden-girl off too?” Chase smiled. She bit down on her cheek. This wasn’t the time. She desperately wished he would take the hint. Her world was crumbling before her eyes and he was here! He would be a witness to the humiliation that would tint her skin…She swallowed dryly unable to wet her parched throat.

She forced a breath through her lungs and took in the woman that clung to his arm. She was nothing like any other woman Chase had introduced her to. For one, she had flesh and color as opposed to the pale anorexic-looking models he lunged for. “Anna, there’s someone I would like you to meet.” The woman loosened her grip on Chase and reached out an amber hand. “I’m Naomi, Olson.” The woman said confidently. Annabelle scrutinized the woman. Not only did she have exquisite taste in outfits, but her hair

also had Annabelle's eyes broadening. A stretched bed of thick curls. She could see now why her bother hadn't been able to shut up about her.

"I'm Annabelle—"

"The woman of the hour." Chase added confidently. It stung that she'd invited him thinking people were going to be talking about her efforts, this was going to be like the time she'd thought she was going to be named valedictorian in college and she'd bragged about it to Chase, but she was just another distinctive student.

"I wish," She shrugged biting back the urge to burst into a blubbery mess.

"Don't go being humble, Chase has told me all about your work," She forced a smile for the woman.

"Annabelle," Amanda called. She'd been pushing through clustered bodies to join her, Chase, and Naomi by the 'Channel Six' sculptures. "Don't listen to what those stuck-up

assholes at the table have to say, you cannot deem your worth from people who are unhappy in their jobs, people who have worked years and couldn't do what you did in days." Amanda said firmly, giving little concern to the people Annabelle had been conversing with.

"I know," Annabelle nodded willing Amanda to return to the table. She didn't take the hint.

"You've worked too hard to be cheated out of what you deserve, Anna. And Simon Neil is an idiot for not seeing it, everyone at that damn table is a fool for not seeing your efforts." She'd lost the battle, the single tear she'd been bottling, slid down her rosy cheek.

Thoughtlessly, she wrapped Amanda in a hug. Even if she didn't get named Brightest Mind, even if no one else saw her worth, she appreciated being there, at that gala with her friend and her brother.

The music stopped. Heads snapped towards the stage; the microphone hissed like claws against a blackboard. Annabelle pulled away from Amanda and winced. Hadn't they done sound checks? Where was the sound engineer Nikola Mallery at a time like this? How could he have let this slip by him? "Everybody get down!" Annabelle recognized the voice. She could bet everyone in the room recognized the voice. She straightened, her eyes on Lucy Wilkens.

Dressed for the occasion in a cream sequin high neck open back mini dress, Annabelle recognized an accessory she could bet her competitor hadn't picked off the rack.

She was wearing a suicide vest. They were all going to die.

Nenny May

CHAPTER EIGHT

Paul Campbell felt a rage simmering within him. Sparked from his restless mind, he could feel it. The tingle it sent to his fingertips. He pushed through the door marked employees only. It creaked. Had it done that before? Opened with an almost human shriek? He wasn't sure. Partly because at the time he'd been jerked through it by an agitated

Susanne the night prior, dust had rained down his busted knuckles.

Who the hell was the man in the flannel shirt? Had that been a parlor trick? Paul had seen magicians in Vegas before. Not with Blake Campbell. He'd tried time without number to tug her from a town that longed for her lifeless corpse. Each time, he'd failed woefully. He'd been to Vegas with Claire—the real one. He couldn't rid his mind of their trip to the circus in Illinois where everything was a trick, an illusion that could get a little… In your face…

He had his doubts. The dust… Claire… they all had to be in his head somehow.

Naked feet tapped against the cool maple floorboards, lips parting in a yawn. Even the insulation on the floors had worn out… The business would be doomed to go under if something wasn't done to the place.

American angels was bare, hollow.

And even still, he wasn't alone. He could feel her standing over him. Claire… He couldn't see her. He didn't want to see her. Though he was weak to the breath fanning the back of his neck. She really didn't have any sense of personal space…

He flexed and a hand rubbing the back of his neck, easing out the stiffness a nap on a stained couch had incurred. Could he call that a nap? He'd merely blinked and the sun had come out to play.

His lips parted, his voice; mute. He'd choked on his words to her. What had he intended to tell her? To crawl back down to the hell, she crept from? She wasn't real. Yet he was powerless in her presence.

Had this been what Blake had endured? His father lurking over her shoulder his demands ceaseless. She'd tried to make it work, to give in to his desires and the media had further ripped apart what was left of her reputation.

He swallowed and gazed wordlessly at the local bar. Blue-green eyes prancing about the open space by the line of chairs and tables and booths. Empty of violent alcoholics, horny single women in tight dresses hiked up, and sweaty bodies rubbing against each other, arms sloping around necks and asses groped and clutched, American Angel's wasn't a small bar. The counter alone seemed to stretch longer than he'd initially predicted. It wasn't the first time he'd seen the place without the hefty evening crowd, women pressed against the men that were only there for the night. But it was the first time he'd focused on it. The last he'd been there alone; he'd made a decision he craved to reverse. He'd crashed his body hard and urgently against a voluptuous bartender. It was a one-off mistake. One that could cost him his four-year relationship with his wife-to-be. He had no interest in repeating it.

Why then couldn't he seem to shrug the woman that prowled behind him?

He frowned. This wasn't the time to let her consume him. Peering instead from the perspective of a carpenter, he had his work cut out for him. He was giddy. It had been too long since he'd poured himself into a project of this magnitude. He was hazy with desire, fingers itching to get dirty. Not only would he have to peel the Walnut strips off the wall, but he would also have to do something about the glacial floors. He couldn't do it for free. A job this intense required more than just his time and sweat. He would invest a quarter of his savings into it and whatever profit he made, it would be reinvested in the wedding.

The Walnut walls weren't standoffish against the white marble bar top. It was a perfect blend with the maple slats beneath his feet. He could

see himself working with something similar. Alder perhaps.

Campbell's House of Timber would have been the ideal supplier for quality Alder planks. However, since the business drowned, he hadn't bothered to assess the startups that popped up in its place.

Claire moved to a chair at the back of the room. He stiffened. She was still there. He'd heard it, the screeching of wooden chairs' legs scraping against the floor. His head nearly jolting in that direction. She wasn't real, he reminded himself. He blinked, his eyes adjusting to the morning sun that had been pouring in through the display windows.

Dark polished Walnut beckoned him. He'd caved. Ten steps and he was between the door and the display window. Fingers running over the chipped edges. They were rugged as if someone had tried to bark them off by hand. Assholes! They couldn't even maintain the careless handiwork.

"As if you could do a better job," Claire huffed. She couldn't seem to mind her own damn business. Perhaps she and the real Claire Fisher had something in common. Neither understood the concept of keeping their nose out of places it didn't belong.

He could as a matter of fact do a better job. All those field trips across the country with Campbell's House of Timber to their client's homes overlooking the installation hadn't been for nothing. He'd tucked beneath his sleeve a thing or two about woodwork and Susanne was his window to flaunt it. American Angels was going to be his practice dummy.

Since Christopher Campbell died, Paul had tried running the crumbling firm. Young and critically unqualified, Paul had assumed the position of CEO and led Campbell's House of Timber to its grave. Helpless in a void, a cavernous abyss of hope snatched by blunt force and a

swirling obscurity; how was he with no business experience to save a dying company? The question had taunted him like a math equation he just couldn't solve. He'd been a second pair of eyes in countless fittings, always behind the scenes with Christopher Campbell after a dreary day. How had he fallen short when push came to shove? He couldn't make sense of it.

He stared at his reflection, dull on the display window for a few moments. His eyes a slender blue-green, frantic beneath furrowed unruly eyebrows. He hated his eyes. A blend of both his parents. It wasn't a single color and as a kid, he'd always been a liar when it came to his eyes. If he told his classmates it was blue, they would argue, it was green. It wasn't green. His lips had been set in a thin line, his chiseled jaw, clenched.

"I can't do it," His head felt light, fingers curled. He wanted her gone. It

was driving him nuts. Having her over his shoulder. Listening. Breathing. Moving. But what in God's name was he going to do to rid himself of the character his brain concocted?

A click and a jingle, his eyes broadened.

Murder was out of the question. He longed for peace of mind. It wasn't to the point of taking someone else's life. Blake hadn't killed anyone to stray away from the voice of his father. Tillamook had made her a laughingstock.

"You like having me around, don't you?" Her voice was confident. He shook his head. He couldn't tell where she was. That was new. He could always see her when she spoke. He peered over his shoulder. She wasn't by the chair at the back of the room. The chairs were unaltered, untouched. If anything, she'd felt… closer.

He couldn't live like this.

He stood, immobile, glaring at the door as it was pushed open.

“Get out.” He growled, a wave of fury crashing through him. It was short-lived. Regret washed over him almost immediately. His words weren’t meant for her. She’d been nothing but nice, he’d been idiotic. Impulsive. He’d given little thought to his outburst.

“Good morning to you to,” Susanne said grumpily shoving him aside. He hadn’t gotten a good look at her features; she’d had her head hung low as she made her way over to the counter. She’d walked swiftly and away from him, flinging her tote bag onto the marble bar top. It landed with a thud and slumped. “Look,” She turned to him. “I don’t know what your problem is, Paul. I tried to get it, your mother just died and you have been in a pissy fucking mood.” She took in a sharp breath. “And I don’t know how taking it out on me is going to help. But I sure as hell

wouldn't stand for it." He nodded saying nothing.

She was gone. Claire.

Weakness churned disturbingly in his stomach. Of course, she was gone. She never existed, to begin with. "And I here I was thinking about your situation." But Susanne did. She was real. And she was angry, a vortex of anger flickering in her eyes.

He'd caused that.

"I'm sorry." Paul Campbell forced. His brows snapped together. He scrutinized the maple floors. He'd been sorry for too long. Sorry that his mother had to pass away in such a tragic manner, sorry that he'd cheated on his fiancé and abandoned her. And sorry that he'd lashed out on Susanne. She wasn't the target of his agitation. Claire was… well, not the real Claire… the one his mind fabricated to plague him. That Claire.

His mother had been dead days, not up to a week, murdered, yet it felt like an eternity. How was he to put up

with an indefinite investigation? “Youwereaboutthinkingme?” The words tumbled out, rushed, scattered. He tried again, slower, fingers clenched at his sides.

“Yes, because I’m an idiot,” She was behind the counter, reaching for her apron on a hook. She’d thrown on a dress that fell flowing to her knees. It was bright, colorful like a summer afternoon. “I felt bad for you. I just wanted help the troubled Campbell kid…” Troubled Campbell kid… as if he hadn’t heard that enough growing up. Tillamook Times had branded him with the nickname.

To this day, the thought of the newspaper had a wrath searing through him.

“You read the articles, didn’t you?” He internally winced at the tremble in his voice.

What the fuck!

He cleared his throat. Certainly, recalling the articles, the stories hit

close to home, but that wasn't enough to render him vulnerable… was it?

She had her back to him, arms behind her, fingers looping the string of the apron tightly over her firm petite ass. In a flutter of a second, she was bent over, his tongue claiming her skin, he was relishing in the gentle shudder of her body as he drew closer to her core. She'd been his for what seemed to be a glorious mistake, and he didn't have a choice other than shoving memories of her bare-cheeks into a never-to-be-touched-drawer.

"How couldn't I, you're not exactly unknown, Paul. You're on almost every news channel. You're on the papers and even on the radio they're debating your state." His lips parted. This… all of it… was his childhood all over again coming back to bite him in the rear-end, and he was sick to his stomach. How had Blake put up with this? She'd only been dead days and they were using him to replace her. Shoving him into the

glare of the red light they'd shone on her. Eyes probing for the slightest sign of a slip-up on his part. "And don't say it's because of the way your mother died. Newspapers knew about you long before she was …murdered." He knew that. The papers couldn't find it in themselves to leave him, an innocent child out of his mother's scandals. She'd made her decisions, uncharacteristic, but they were her choices.

The people of Tillamook couldn't live with that.

His fingers ached. He unclenched his fist. Dust rained down his knuckles. She shrieked. She'd called for help… Her floor assistant. He'd left her petrified… He was left with a jarred puzzle piece that didn't quite fit. He shook his head. This wasn't the time. Nor the place. The only person that could help him make sense of the jarred puzzle piece was the frightened woman he couldn't get out of his head. Dr. Patterson.

"And what, you feel bad for me?" He bit compelling himself to return to their conversation. He joined her by the counter, taking up a bar stool by the plastic fruit bowl. He reached for a comedically yellow pineapple that wasn't even the size of his palm. Clutched, he rolled his shoulders and turning, he took in the bare room for an unwanted presence. They were alone. And not much of a religious nut, but he prayed to whoever would bid him a listening ear that she wouldn't return. His lips twitched in an almost-smile that couldn't make it. "I don't want your pity." His tone was flat. He squeezed the plastic fruit till it nearly flattened in his grip.

"It's not pity. It's stupidity on my part." She turned on the tap over the sink and ducked beneath the counter. He heard rasping and rustling, glass clicking.

"I'm not going to argue with you there." She straightened; eyes narrowed into slits.

“Whataboutmefacinatingwas,” He hissed, lips pressed in a thin line. What the hell was happening to his tongue? Dread twisted in his gut. She’d eyed him curiously. He shrugged. He needed to speak with Lisa Patterson. Now more than ever, he needed her. When was their next session? He was blank… She hadn’t looked as though she’d been eager to speak with him after he’d awoken helpless in her office.

“Are you okay?” Susanne’s head tilted. He nodded and gestured with a wave for her to overlook it. “I was thinking about your mother. And how you mentioned the other day that you couldn’t bury her.”

“I never said I couldn’t bury her. I said she would stay in a goddamn county morgue for heaven knows how flapping long!” He roared.

“Yes,” She shut off the running water and dipped her bare hands in the clustered sink. “And I was

wondering if you'd be interested in a memorial service."

He scratched his nose. "What?"

"You could go on with the ceremony. Bury a casket in her honor, light candles and celebrate the life she lived at least until the body is released to you." He gritted his teeth. Burying an empty casket, moving forward with a funeral even though the body was yet to be released from the custody of the county morgue seemed like a grand waste of money he didn't have. And what would he be he celebrating? She'd died earlier than most women she'd grown up with. Her life had been hell. Television stations and newspapers had her dancing to their sick tunes. She'd been exiled from her own community and her husband continually shadowed her from beyond his coffin. "And afterwards, you could have a wake." Indisputably, his mother had lived a life that mirrored the lap of luxury. She'd resided in the Campbell

manor and wore overpriced sweaters and slacks. She'd hid behind a wealth born from prostitution and resentment festered in him.

They were different people. Blood. But his belt was tighter than hers. He couldn't afford a memorial service and a wake months or years before he got hold of her limp lifeless body. Nor did he think he had the emotional stability to endure it.

"I don't want to bury a bloody casket. She deserves to be laid to rest after all she's been through. And burying an empty box and slapping her name on it isn't going to work!" He snapped flinging the fake fruit at the glass shelf behind where she stood. It shattered in a loud crash.

She yelped, wincing at the sudden noise. Glass drizzled down, pooling at her feet.

"Get out," She whispered. He remained unmoved. "I said GET OUT!" No. She didn't get to dictate when he left. "I was just trying to

help!" She side-stepped the shards that dotted the floor, rubble crunching and crumbling beneath her feet. "There's no need to be a total ass about it. If it's a bad idea just say so," She crouched beneath the counter.

"I didn't ask for your help," He stood on restless legs. He didn't want to leave her to the mess he'd created, but he couldn't help it. "And you were right. It was stupid of you to think about me. Try not to make the same mistake twice." He breezed across the room and through the doors.

The autumn morning air welcomed him with a slap, reminding him that he didn't have a jacket. Neighboring stores were bustling with life. Customers drifting in and out onto 4th Street. Cars whizzed by slowing at the intersection to Birch Avenue.

"Think you can work with her?" He made his way down 4th Street past the ice-cream shop by American

Angels, the morning sun dancing on his forearms poking its head out from behind an army of clouds, his face scrunched up. His eyes weighed a ton. Couldn't she take a hint? She was the last person he needed to speak with. Anyone including his mother's bloody killer would have been a better companion.

He swallowed. He didn't mean that. However, he had a few choice words for the man that took the life of Blake Campbell. She wasn't just a hooker. She was a mother. She was mentally sick. She was a victim.

"What do you mean?" He mused. He could feel her trailing him as he curved onto Birch Avenue. A Honda Coupe zipped across the asphalt. He didn't know where he was headed. But he knew the area well enough. That was the thing about small towns, they barely changed. Come rain, come shine, they were the same through the years. A few homes like Mrs. Agatha Patrick's little-red-bungalow along

Birch Avenue had been subjected to slight changes. Subtle enough that not many would have noticed. The petite one-bedroom had been recoated and touched up.

"You promised you would redo the walls, or have you already forgotten?" Mr. William's had trimmed his lawn for the first time in decades.

"I don't know." The faulty sign outside the twenty-four-seven-convivence store and pharmacy had been replaced. "She's hot, great when her legs are parted, but she isn't the brightest bulb." The portholes on the road had been covered up.

The changes were present, but they weren't over the top.

"You didn't even give her a fair chance." Claire grunted and jogged to catch up with him.

"I listened to her, didn't I?" He stopped and turned; arms flared. His head throbbed. She was gone. He was taken aback. A woman with her

toddler sped past him. In her eyes, apprehension had been written in bold. She'd been careful not to get too close to the crazy man in the middle of the street.

Blake Campbell had been the whacky woman on Miller Avenue.

"Blake deserves to be put to rest, I get that, but until her killer is caught…" Claire continued unbothered.

"Until her killer is caught…" He mimicked. "You know what," "I'm going to catch that killer myself with my own bare hands and I'm going to make him beg for mercy." He drew to a stop at Netarts Highway.

"First you thought getting rid of Susanne was going to make me go away, push came to shove you couldn't lay a hand on her." He frowned. "What makes you think you can go head-to-head with the man that jabbed holes in your mother?" Anger rippled through him. It was all-consuming. Blinding.

"Mark my words, Claire. I will kill him, and I will kill that bloody bartender too if it's going to get you off my back."

Lisa Patterson shifted impatiently in her seat. They were still a good fifteen minutes away taking in the cluster of cars that lined Laurel Avenue. Luxury cars had been discarded on either side of the narrow street. From Mercedes Benz sedans to Bentley coupes parked outside boutiques, insurance companies and even gas stations. Channel Six had gone all out with its guest list. She only wished the high-class visitors they'd invited had the decency to respect other road users and not shut down people's schedules for their celebration.

She'd been wrong about Paul. He wasn't a killer. He wasn't the monster she made him out to be. Sure, he'd

had a rough enough childhood. He'd been subject to harassment by newspapers, oppression by proxy, but claiming the life of his mother… She'd misjudged him. Gone to varying lengths to paint him in a light he didn't deserve. She was no better than the newspapers. Than the news stations that referred to him as a troubled kid. How had she, a woman who'd lived her life heal the burdened become a burden?

She had to help him. To save him from himself. He wasn't the kind of client she worked with. Hell, if the tables were turned, she would have transferred him to another psychologist. She couldn't do that. Not anymore. Not after what she'd seen in her office. His outburst. He was distressed.

Her brand was rigid. She was known to help women and girls the psychiatry department had shattered. She was the light to bring them from the shell they'd recoiled into. It was

after all her brand. She could change things up. It was long overdue.

She would do things the right way. Even if that meant admitting to malpractice and undergoing a suspension of her practicing license.

"I talked to Bernard Sutter the other day," Regan admitted, fingers drumming over the steering wheel. Shivers of fear wracked her body. She hadn't told anyone about her meeting with Sutter. Not even Christian and he was closer to her than her neighbors Marie Halter and Norman Kent. Neatly carved eyebrows furrowed, forehead crinkled. She'd been waiting to get that off her chest.

"When?" Lisa glared at her. Good God, she was beautiful, but painfully so. Even wearing a look of scorn, Regan had to admit, Lisa Patterson was unforgivably sexy and managed to open the lust floodgates.

"He wanted to close the case, so I…" Regan trailed off. Rage trembled through Lisa. How had Regan put her

life on the line like that? It was careless and disappointing. She didn't expect that from a lawyer, a District Attorney.

"You what?" Lisa compelled.

"I threatened him." They crawled behind a Jeep. They were moving at snail's speed. She couldn't see beyond the Hyundai two cars ahead. "He knows I suspect him for the murder of Blake Campbell."

Shit.

Lisa leaned forward in her seat eyes focused on Regan Sinclair's profile. The radio mumbled; the volume reduced to a hushed whisper. It was a discussion, a debate she couldn't care less about.

"And you didn't think to mention this before?" Lisa Patterson's voice was edged with irritation. Regan Sinclair's fingers curled around the wheel till her knuckles paled.

Lisa ran her tongue over her bottom lip. Her mouth was suddenly dry.

"I… didn't care about you then," Lisa Patterson's heart somersaulted in her chest. She scratched her nose. Regan Sinclair cared about her. The most gorgeous woman since Madeline cared about her, Lisa Patterson. The thought sent shots of pleasure through her. "I mean I did. Since when I saw you at my office the other day, I haven't been able to get you off my fucking mind." Regan's cheeks blazed pink. "But telling you about my trip to Salem… the look in his eyes… I didn't know how to bring it up."

She didn't know how to bring up the threat she made to Blake Campbell's killer? Lisa found that hard to believe. At times, she could be the farthest thing from approachable. Lisa knew that. However, getting people to open up to her had been her life since fleeing the gorilla-grip of her own mental destitution. Why then was Regan skirmish when it came to letting her guard down to Lisa?

“Oh my God.” Lisa slumped back in her seat. Did Regan realize he could do to her what had been done to Blake Campbell? He could decorate her with just as much holes as he had Blake. He would grasp her by the neck squeezing until she’d coughed her last breath. She’d not only put her life at risk but Lisa’s too! He could come after the counseling psychologist knowing that Regan would have told someone about him.

Fuck!

“It was stupid. I know.” Lisa nodded; arms folded over her chest. What in God’s name led her to believe that was a good idea from the onset? Salem wasn’t a thirty-minute drive. It was about an hour and a half. She’d had an hour and a half to give her decision a second thought and she hadn’t. “He was going to close the case, Lisa. I couldn’t let him.”

Bullshit!

“Let me get this straight. He was going to shove the Campbell Murder

investigation beneath the carpet and you decided to risk your life and mine to play the goddamn hero?"

"You?" Her head whirled. "I'm the one that could die and you're managing to make this about you?" A horn blared. Regan crawled another inch towards the event center.

"I'm not making this about me." Lisa rose to her own defense.

"Then please, enlighten me, what the hell are you doing?" Lisa Patterson's lips opened and closed. What was she doing? "And don't you dare judge me. You were the one willing to risk a malpractice suit to incriminate an innocent man." Silence wedged itself between them.

Lisa Patterson's stomach cramped. She felt like she was going to throw up. Blake Campbell had met a gruesome end at the hands of Governor Sutter. She couldn't imagine a similar fate befalling the District Attorney. The thought had fear swirling in her gut.

“I didn’t mean to make this about me.” They crept past an auto-repair shop. “I… I don’t know what I meant.” Silence. “You said you care about me, why?”

Regan shrugged. “Heck if I know. Normally when Julie does any form of matchmaking, it never works out,”

“Matchmaking?”

“Isn’t that why she sent you to me?” Lisa huffed.

“She recommended you because she thought you were the best attorney for my situation. I can see your head is too far up your ass to notice that.”

Silence.

In the distance, three blocks down, the event center was swarming with news vans, cruisers, and fire trucks. Her throat tightened. She’d seen a scene similar to this on the news. Channel Nine. Blake Campbell’s Miller Avenue Manor had been clustered with a comparable line-up.

"What the hell?" Lisa mumbled beneath her breath, leaning forward to get a better look. The slow-moving pile-up didn't make it any easier to see what was happening.

Reaching for her phone, she clicked open her news app and reloaded the page for anything she could have missed. If it were nothing more than a celebration, why did Laurel Avenue resemble Miller Avenue the night of Blake Campbell's murder?

Her eyes landed on the ambulances that sat in wait by the entrance to the event center. Three of them. Then she knew what real terror was.

"Susanne Ellison?" Lieutenant Wilson leaned against the white countertop; badge clutched in a flaky pallid hand. Claire Fisher was close behind him, purse clutched to her

chest. She'd grown weary of checking her phone for some sort of update. The only other person that buzzed her phone was Jay. He'd managed to get Alex involved and both her brothers had brought her inbox to life with all the reasons why she had to return to Portland. They didn't get it. She loved Paul. She wasn't going to leave him when he needed her the most.

He had no one else.

His mother had been murdered. He was estranged from his cousins. If she left him… She couldn't imagine what that would do to him.

Paul Campbell had been spotted at a local bar. American Angels. Claire Fisher was wild with a swelling hope. Fidgety. He wasn't dead. And from the looks of things, he wasn't in imminent danger. The woman who'd spotted him outside the district bar had been Stephanie Fuller, mother of four-year-old Dominique Fuller. The banker had picked up her son from daycare and was about to take him for

some ice cream when she'd hurried past Paul to their Birch Avenue Home. Up to date with the State of Tillamook, she'd seen the pictures the City Police Department had published. He was a broad male with slender eyes a blue-green hue, a chiseled jaw, sharp, a contrast to full cheeks. Stephanie had reported a frenzied man that met the description of the Missing Persons Report.

"We're not open," Susanne said. She didn't bother the Lieutenant a second glance. Rose cheeks flushed, forehead puckered and lips in a hardline, the woman wasn't in a talking mood.

"We're not here for drinks." Connelly Wilson nodded for Claire Fisher to join him by the counter. Ten steps from the entrance and she was by his side. Paul had been under her nose the entire time. He wasn't a hostage of his mother's killer.

When the City Police Department's own Lieutenant had

offered to join the search party of cadets that had been turning Tillamook on its back searching for Paul, she could hardly believe her luck. Offering her a ride in his cruiser had been off-putting. He'd then confided that Paul was a friend of a friend. And he was merely sticking his neck out for the Sherriff.

"Then why are you here?" The woman paused, a shot glass and a rag in both hands. At the mention of Sherriff Pierce, respect for her fiancé rippled through her. He knew people in high places. His family was connected through Tillamook Community despite the scorn they faced.

Lieutenant Wilson drew open his blazer and produced a picture. The one that had been published of Paul Campbell. It was a blown-up version of his passport photo. He'd had his lips pressed in a thin line; the lighting hadn't done his blue-green eyes

justice. He'd looked tense in the image.

"Have you seen this man?" He slid the picture across the counter. She leaned; his eyes wandered to her cleavage. The low neckline of her bright dress was doing little to conceal her attractive chest.

"Paul?" She placed the glass down on the counter. Hope welled up in Claire at the woman's recognition. "What about him?"

"He's been missing for two…" Wilson turned to Claire. She nodded. "Two days."

"Missing?" Susanne wore her surprise plainly on her striking features. She shook her head. "He was just here. He spent the night. Twice."

Claire let out a sigh of relief.

Apprehension gripped her.

He wasn't in danger.

He'd spent the night with an alluring bartender whose cleavage alone was a marketing strategy. Claire couldn't meet up with the woman.

She resembled a movie star. And Claire? Her chest wasn't even half the woman's. They couldn't be real. Resentment clouded her thoughts. "Do you have any idea where he could have gone?" Connelly Wilson reached for the image.

Susanne shook her head.

"No, but he's been acting really weird."

Claire frowned.

"Weird how?" She cleared her throat. It sounded rusty to her own ears.

"Unstable." She nodded to her shattered shelf. Shards of glass stuck out awkwardly in what was once a display. "Did this before he left this morning." How had she remained calm despite the damage Paul had apparently caused?

"Why?" Claire demanded. Susanne was hesitant.

"We were talking about his mother. He got violent and broke my display case."

"Miss. Ellison are you implying Mr. Campbell could be a potential danger to himself and others?" Lieutenant Wilson wanted to know.

Claire's throat tightened. Paul wasn't dangerous. He'd always had a temper, but to be considered a danger…

"No," Susanne reached for the glass she'd placed on the counter and jabbed the rag through the rim. "I'm saying get him help. He isn't taking this thing with his mother too well."

Lieutenant Wilson had heard enough. "I'm putting out a Bolo and an APB." He turned and placed an arm reassuringly on Claire Fisher's shoulder. "We're going to find him," Letting his hand fall to his side, he side-stepped her and made his way out of the 4th Street bar, his phone in hand.

"What happened when he was here." Claire Fisher's voice was a cracked glass, brittle.

Susanne put away the shot glass and reached into the sink for a saucer.

Claire placed her purse on the counter. Not knowing what to do with her arms, she let them wrap around her torso. This wasn't the Claire Fisher that had purchased an over-the-counter plane ticket to support her husband to be. That Claire was brave, determined. She was a shadow of her former self and it made her stomach whine in despair.

"Nothing." Susanne's response was automatic, impulsive. She began wiping down the dripping plate.

"Please, he's my fiancé and I've been worried sick about him." She put away the plate and reached into the foamy dishwater for another cup.

"Ma'am, all I can tell you is he's been in good hands." Claire gave her a dirty look.

Silence. Claire turned, taking in the room. She wasn't a prude. She'd been to bars in Portland. She'd relished in a drink or two… hell,

she'd gotten shitfaced one too many times after a dreary day in class. Her students were smart, but they could drive her nuts. Paul had always been her emergency contact. He'd always been her designated driver when she wanted to surrender herself to a few shots of tequila in a clingy high riding dress. He'd never once judged her… This place… It wasn't up to her standard. It was small, cramped, and had a peculiar smell she couldn't quite place.

"You had sex with him, didn't you?" Claire's tone was accusing. Susanne went white. It didn't make sense. Paul leaving the comfort of a hotel bed for a bar. For two nights. He didn't call, he didn't even return her texts.

"Excuse me?"

"I know, Paul. He's a womanizer. Spending two nights away from home in a bar… he had to have a reason and this…" Claire gestured to the

woman's voluptuous chest. "Is enough of a reason."

"What happened while Paul was here is none of your damn business, Ma'am." Was she daft?

"I put out a Missing Person's Report. What happened while he was here is official police business." Claire reached for her purse. "Now I suggest you cooperate fully or you can be charged for obstructing an investigation."

"Whatever," Susanne shrugged. "I've told you and your officer friend all I know. Now, American Angels isn't open for business and you are trespassing beyond work hours. So, I'm going to politely request you get the hell out of my bar."

There wasn't a doubt in Claire Fisher's mind. Jay was right. She was stupid to have convinced herself that he had changed. He hadn't.

He was as much a player as when they'd started dating all those years ago.

He'd thrown away all they'd built.

He'd slept with the slutty bartender on 4th Street.

Her father had explained it to her before the divorce. Life wasn't a straight line. There were ups and there were downs. It wasn't going to be easy. Falling in love, running a family in a sleepy town, or even being the best version of herself. And joining the force, Rachel Olson had known there would come a time her life would be on the line. She'd seen officers die in their line of duty. She'd heard about them from Sherriff Pierce. She knew what she was getting into signing that form and that waver. Neither she nor her next of kin could press charges if she were to become a casualty while carrying out

her duties. However, she wasn't ready to die. She hadn't even had kids. She wasn't even sure if she was good with kids. Tuscany wasn't her kid. She was her neighbor's neglected daughter.

She hadn't gotten to see her father again. Donovan Olson. After the breaking and entering, he'd moved on from Rachel. Apparently, he'd settled down with another family on 12th Street by the curb of Fir Avenue. Guilt had sat heavy on her chest for years, closely accompanied by curiosity and regret. He hadn't been at the funeral. She'd waited like a fool by Cecilia's casket for him. He was supposed to speak at the memorial. Tears shimmering in her eyes, clothed from head to toe in black, Rachel had spoken on his behalf. Assured herself that her mother's death, the funeral, everything was pressing heavy on his shoulders. She'd lied to her Aunties, Uncles, Cousins and to herself that he would be back when the dust settled.

If she were asked in that moment, in an event center on Laurel Avenue, clothed in silk at the brink of death to recall Donovan Olson, she couldn't. Days turned to weeks and weeks to months. He was gone. She'd done her best to erase him and nearly everything that pertained to him. His scent, his pictures… everything was gone. She'd burned his clothes, the family portrait he'd hung on their living room wall, she'd scrubbed down the carpets and given away their bedding.

She'd only heard about his new family through eavesdropping on her aunt Sophia Olson on the third anniversary of Cecilia's death.

Rachel hadn't stalked Donovan the way she had Mathew. It had gotten to the point that she could have walked by her own father on the Streets of Tillamook and she wouldn't have noticed. Try as she might, she couldn't recall his body frame. Had he been tall? With broad shoulders and

an itty-bitty waist? Or lean all over to the point his clothes clung loosely to him. Had he grown a beard that by now would be salt and pepper? He didn't visit. He didn't keep in touch. She'd let him go. Let him vanish from her life the way all men did.

Detective Dawson was mute by her side. Taking into consideration his personality, witty, cocky, and confident… silence was unsettling emanating from him. And even still, Rachel Olson had a feeling, Detective Dawson's wordlessness wasn't a result of the petrification that ought to grip him by the throat. She saw the vest. Beige, clumpy, and violently terrifying. The entire venue saw the vest. She'd never seen one in person. On television undoubtedly.

Time had slowed, her heart violently banging against her chest. In the corner of her eye, she'd caught a glimmr; he'd pulled out his phone, fingers gliding over the screen. She was helpless, useless. Where was her

phone? In her pockets? Trembling fingers felt up silk fabric. She was in a dress. Her bag? She'd left it by their table at the other end of the room.

Her legs were bricks.

Silence echoed the once cheerful gathering. She wasn't the only one victim of rubbery legs and a cold sweat that broke out on her bareback. Had this been what Cecilia had felt the day their home had been broken into? Nobody moved. It all felt lucid. She'd been convinced this was a terrible, horrendous nightmare, pre-gala-jitters…pre-date-with-Detective-Dawson-jitters. But she couldn't wake up. Squeezing her eyes shut, gulping a lung full and forcing them open, she wasn't in her room.

She wasn't under the covers on her stomach, an arm beneath her fluffy storm-grey pillow. Gosh, her room! Would she ever see it again? Her stomach plummeted.

And that's when she saw them, the bulky men with M16 rifles slung

over their chests. Bullet-proof vests sweaters over their white-button-down shirts. She didn't think this was the time to be recalling pointless information like the kind of guns the swollen men were going to use to decorate her with holes. How in hell were they going to make it out of this alive?

"Sorry to rain on your parade," Lucy Wilkins said into the microphone in her lean hands. Her words bounced off the walls. They carried a sinister air with them as they coursed through the gathering. She maneuvered the stage as though she were calling out roll-call. Ten steps and she was at the right side of the stage. "This set-up… I have to give credit where credit is due. This is beyond my expectations." Her heels clicked and clacked as she moved almost choreographically, taking her time to drink in the room. "Before we get into the gory details of why I just had to get an invite, here are the

ground rules." Her voice was sickeningly sweet and paired with glimmering eyes that danced with purpose. Color drained from Rachel Olson's face. "If you move or scream, my friends in the crowd are instructed to shoot on sight." Dread gnawed at her insides.

Detective Dawson continued to fiddle with his phone within his blazer. He was by the 'Channel Six' sculpture, a good portion of his body shielded by the branded artwork and the other obstructed by Rachel Olson. Neither gunmen nor Lucy Wilkens could see the dull glare of his phone. But how much longer till they caught on?

Detective Olson couldn't let them put a hole through Chase Dawson. He was more than just her work partner. She couldn't lose him. He wasn't like Mathew. His words weren't sharp edged and tinged with enough venom to spite her. He didn't nitpick at her flaws. Detective Dawson was

different, good different. Cocky and sarcastic and never knew when the hell to shut up, but he wasn't a bad person. She couldn't lose him to 5.56mm caliber bullet or a clunky beige explosive jacket. "As you know, Channel Nine has always been Tillamook's go-to News station. We had the highest rating in National News Station history for the longest time. What kind of ambassador would I be if I sit back and let some rookie who didn't even study journalism in college take that away from us?"

A shriek filled the air, terror coursed through Rachel's veins. She shifted her weight from one foot to another. She and Detective Dawson stilled. "Let me go!" They knew the screeching voice.

Annabelle Dawson.

"Please!"

Discarding his phone, Chase lunged after his sister.

Detective Olson hadn't given it a second thought. Leaping after him

had been impulsive. “Chase stop!” She thundered.

The sound that pursued her words had been sharp and rendered a hostile tranquility in the two-thousand-square-feet event center.

Detective Olson was helpless, a tear running down her make-up-caked cheek.

Annabelle was carried like a sack of potatoes over a chiseled man’s shoulder up the stairs that lined the stage. Clear as day, she’d kicked and squirmed and wriggled. His grip tightened.

Detective Dawson hadn’t made it past the row of tables scattered out before him. An M16 was pressed to the back of his head.

He stopped.

“I know nobody wants to die. And nobody has to.” Annabelle was placed on her feet in the middle of the stage. It took everything in her not to whirl and take in the eyes of her assailants. She knew what Lucy Wilkens looked

like by memory. She'd studied her programs. Sought her for Breaking News regarding Tillamook. The chiseled man took three steps back and held the nose of his rifle to the back of Annabelle's head.

Lucy Wilkens was slim with silken peach skin…

"We're going to play a little game of Simon Says and you, dear Annabelle are going to determine if you or your friends live or die." She had an oval face and heavy-lidded lake-blue eyes.

"W-why are you doing this?" Annabelle forced. Her body quivered with swallowed sobs.

"How do you think we were able to cover details of the Campbell case before even the authorities could piece the puzzle together?" Lucy Wilkens let out a menacing cackle. As if something in her words had tickled her fancy. Was this the length a reporter was willing to go to boost the ratings of their news program? "We

orchestrated the murder of Blake Campbell. The stab wounds? Ten of them between her chest and stomach. The wedding dress? Quite fitting for the unmarried slut that she was. She was begging for it. People hated her. We just gave the people what they wanted and reported every waking detail."

How couldn't Detective Dawson have seen it? The media was always a step ahead. "You did that?" Annabelle was blanched.

Lucy Wilkens nodded. "And as an extra-precaution, I had a friend of mine take the fall. You might know him. Does the name Bernard Sutter ring a bell?" Annabelle was sick to her stomach. She didn't fit in this world. She was the right piece for the wrong puzzle. "Shall we take a step back and peer through the eyes of the dead woman… I mean isn't that what you're known for, Miss. Dawson?"

Annabelle Dawson's mouth was a desert, her eyes were wild with terror.

“Blake Campbell opted out of going to college and entangled herself with a man that was thirty-years older than she was. They weren’t even legally married. What kind of example was she setting for the people of Tillamook? She worked in a company that was founded and owned by her so-called *husband*’s wife. And when her lavish life was about to be dragged from beneath her? She turned to prostitution and was diagnosed along the lines with schizophrenia. Not only was she a walking STD and a lunatic, but she was begging to be put out of her goddamn misery.”

Annabelle stiffened.

“So, Miss. Dawson. Simon says you take down your news segment.” Lucy Wilkens dug into her dress pocket and pulled out a phone. Swiping her across the screen, she returned the microphone to her lips. “You’re going to be given this phone to publish an article.” She dangled the phone in front of Annabelle. Behind

where she stood, a screen mirrored the phone's screen. The message was displayed in a legible font. Below it, two buttons sat. One in a pale blue that read 'Publish' and another in white that read 'Cancel'. The ball was in her court. Countless lives were in her hands. "We've taken the liberty to draft it up for you. It's a confession of plagiarism of Channel Nine's intellectual property rights over Behind the Body." She'd worked tirelessly to conduct interviews. To schedule appointments. Her reputation in Tillamook would be done for if she published such an article. Channel Six would be bankrupt if their ratings took a nose-dive. And who was to say after publishing the article, Lucy wouldn't go back on her word and shoot everyone or blow the event center to bits?

Panic seized her brain. Why couldn't she have sat out the celebration? She didn't want to die.

Not like this. Not with the people she knew and loved.

"H-how did you pin this on Sutter?"

Lucy Wilkens chuckled.

"You know what kid, you might not be cut out for journalism, but you sure have an act for asking the right questions, I'll give you that."

She was buying time. For what? She didn't know.

"Governor Sutter has a reputation. Married to his childhood sweetheart, known to have the cleanest record in Tillamook history. However, his glimmering marriage has been on the rocks since… Well, since I can remember and he's been a loyal client of the late Miss. Campbell. What better time to execute her murder than an hour before their scheduled appointment?"

Blake Campbell didn't deserve the death she'd met. Ten stab wounds.

Four lined her ribs…

Switching off the microphone, Lucy Wilkens approached Annabelle.

Two between her sagging breasts…

"Arms out sweetie." Lucy Wilkens placed the phone in rubbery hands.

Three at her hip…

Annabelle's fingers remained uncurled around the sleek black phone.

And a single wound at the corner of her neck…

She'd been strangled to death in her Tillamook home on Miller Avenue. Annabelle knew the story. It made sense. They'd needed her dead before Bernard Sutter, ever so time conscious arrived at the scene. They'd done everything in their power to kill her before he pulled into the fifty-six-year-old-woman's Miller Avenue home. Annabelle couldn't forget the facts. Tillamook couldn't rid its mind of the elderly woman exiled from her

own hometown. “Ten seconds. Simon doesn’t have all day.”

Lucy returned to the middle of the stage and switched on the microphone.

“What will she choose?” She’d asked the question rhetorically in her on-air voice, a hand gestured to the monitor behind Annabelle. “I have to say, Channel Six, this is exciting!”

“Don’t do it!” Chase yelled. “You’ve worked too damn hard to get where you are, Anna. For the first time, I want you to put yourself first, damn it, you deserve it!”

“Five,” Lucy Wilkens reminded Annabelle, fingers curled around the detonator. “Four,” Fear choked her. She was never going to be the selfish version of herself Chase wanted her to be. She was who she was. She was Annabelle, she cared about her friends and family. Their lives were in her hands. If burying her career was all it took to save countless lives, she would do it in a flutter of a second.

"Three," And she would do it over and over again.

"Two," She tapped on the publish button. The screen dulled. A circle swirled. Almost immediately a tick appeared. Her eyes squeezed shut.

Thunderous booming nearly rendered Annabelle unconscious. Instinctively, she dropped to her knees. Bullets rippled through the air. "Everybody get down!" A voice blared. "SWAT!" Another crash had Annabelle's bowel releasing and dripping down her leg.

"Mrs. Wilkens, you're under arrest for the murder of Blake Campbell, for conspiracy to commit murder, for attempted murder, and for attempted mass-suicide." M16 rifles were lowered. Boots hammered over the stage, down the stairs and into the crowd. Arms rose in surrender. Shrieks of relief and panic filled the air as bodies clustered by the exit.

Annabelle stood, taking in the chaos. She'd gone head-to-head with

a killer. All the while she'd been under the impression Lucy Wilkens was a bitter rival. Channel Nine was nothing more than an opponent news station. She couldn't have been farther from the truth. Lucy Wilkens and the rest of the Channel Nine crew had gone as far as murdering a woman to boost their ratings. Annabelle wasn't cut out for the journalism life. That hadn't been what brought her to Tillamook. Electronics Engineering had. She'd opted for the role of a Broadcast Technician and settled for a position that nearly cost her life and the life of her loved ones.

Strong arms embraced her. Skittish and dampened from the waist down by her own urine, Annabelle pulled away from Chase Dawson's grip. "For once in your goddamn life, Anna, you couldn't be selfish?" He rose an unruly eyebrow. He didn't have an off button. Even with their lives at risk, he'd managed to come up with one of *his* comments.

"We're alive," Her eyes pooled. He nodded; hands shoved in his pants pockets. Her hands covered her wobbling lips. "Naomi!" She kicked off her shoes and took the stairs two at a time off the stage. "Where's Naomi?" She pushed through frenzied bodies. "Naomi!" She called at the top of her lungs.

She suppressed a shiver and drew to a sudden stop. Just when she'd thought it was over…

"Shit!" Chase hissed.

He couldn't miss it. It was real. All too real. The crimson pool that grew by Rachel Olson's limp body. Her legs and arms were twisted awkwardly. Amber skin bleached. "Don't you dare die on me Olson!" Chase Dawson dropped to his knees. Shrugging off his blazer, he rolled it into a ball and pressed it over her bullet wound. She'd been shot in her lower abdomen and stepped on by the stampede of hysterical guests.

“Don’t just stand there Anna, get someone in here, NOW!”

Annabelle forced her legs to cooperate.

Detective Dawson drew Rachel to his chest. Her body lurched forward. She coughed, blood dripping from parted lips. It didn’t stop. “Stay with me, Olson. This is just your second fucking murder investigation,” His lips wobbled. He was half mad with panic. “How in hell are you going to get as good as me if you die now?” Tears shimmered in his eyes. He couldn’t lose her. She was his partner. He couldn’t imagine cases without her.

Shit!

He continued to apply pressure to her wound. Where the hell was the damn ENT’s?

“You can’t leave your fucking door man… I saved you four goddamn seconds walking into this case I’m not going to let that go to waste,”

She blinked. “So, a-are you going to come back to work at the S-s-sherriff’s d-department?” He drew her closer and nodded. He’d never given her a definite answer over drinks.

“I will, Baby.” Relief welled up inside him when he saw the men in white led by Annabelle pushing through the cluster of people by the doors. “But you have to stay with me. You can’t leave me with Pierce all by myself. That’s fucking selfish,” The corner of her mouth quirked up. “And I never pegged you the selfish kind,” Her teeth were stained crimson. He sniffled.

“How is she?” A man asked crouching down to take her from him.

“Alive. She’s alive. But she’s loosing too much blood.” The second man in white approached them with the stretcher.

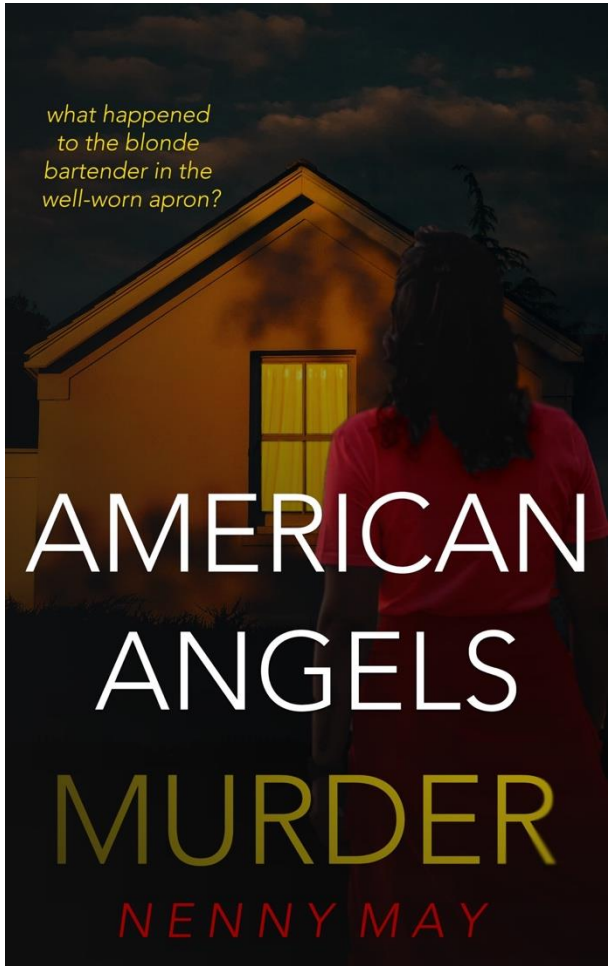
“We’re going to take it from here.”

The event center was empty. Both the gunmen and the guests had been evacuated.

She didn’t deserve to die.

Not like this.

The End.


what happened
to the blonde
bartender in the
well-worn apron?
AMERICAN
ANGELS
MURDER
NENNY MAY

Nenny May

AMERICAN ANGELS MURDER

(Preview)

Keep reading for a preview of American Angels Murder Book two in the Campbell Murder Series…

PROLOGUE

They'd instructed Detective Rachel Olson to take some time off. It had been an order. She wasn't to return to Long Prairie Rd till her injuries were a faint memory. She didn't know what was more painful. Her wound on her lower abdomen or the boredom that threatened to drive her stir-crazy. She'd spent minutes each day staring at the grey-white walls by the window to her left, taken back to Laurel Avenue the morning of the gala, anxiety plunging her into a controlled panic. She'd been shot. It wasn't a straying bullet. The man that shot her, had intended to kill her. She would have been a casualty. And for

what, because she'd lunged after Detective Dawson in an active hostage?

Ruefully missing her bedroom as death halfheartedly dug its nails into her skin, she'd been relieved to wake up in the comfort of her storm-grey bedsheets beneath a white-chocolate comforter the days after her discharge papers had been signed by non-other than Detective Dawson a month into men in scrubs and gloves cutting her open and retrieving a 5.56mm cartridge bullet branded crimson.

She'd been home nearly another month since then, her only guests; Detective Dawson and Tuscany. Chase had made it a habit to poke his head in at least twice every week with a recuperating soup of some sort and books; crime thrillers. In his opinion, it was the closest thing she was going to get to the adrenaline of sitting on a case.

Reading had been a daze in the first weeks of her discharge. She'd stared at the pages until the words blurred and clumped together.

Tuscany on the other hand, had begun to treat Detective Olson's home as hers. After school, she would knock persistently at Rachel's door. Tuscany didn't shadow Rachel the way Chase did during his visit. Tuscany was an indifferent emotional support. She was a listening ear to Rachel and a movie partner till her mother would bang on Rachel's door with a paper smile, requesting Tuscany return to her room.

Rachel had been cocooned in oversized-clothing, feeding off Detective Dawson's regularly scheduled rant about work. No new case had been slapped on his lap, but working directly with Lieutenant Connelly Wilson and Sargent Beverly Garwood on a property invasion case had begun to take its toll on him.

She was fine. In her opinion, good enough to return to her desk. Her medication had long kicked in and shouldered the pain. It wasn't as bad as when she'd initially been discharged from Aventist hospital. Her body had begun to work again. She wasn't crippled or bedridden. She was ready to step into the shoes of lead Detective of Tillamook's Sherriff's Department.

And even if Pierce wouldn't let her back in her office on Long Prairie premises, he had no control over an investigation embarked upon in her own leisure. She couldn't get an official case on her hands. Neither could she get the thrill out of the countless paperbacks Detective Dawson had piled by the edge of her bed. She could however leap down a rabbit-hole she'd crawled from. Now more than ever with the pending release of Luke Edwards from prison.

She would for the second time in nearly eight-years probe her

mother's case. There was more to the death of Cecilia-Jackson-Brown. She was more than just a casualty. Luke Edwards and Henry Jenkin deserved a life sentence. The slap-on-the-wrist-punishment they'd gotten was unfair to Cecilia. And Detective Olson was willing to do whatever it took to convince a judge to reopen the case of Cecilia-Jackson-Brown shot and killed in her Oceanside Tillamook home in an alleged robbery gone wrong.

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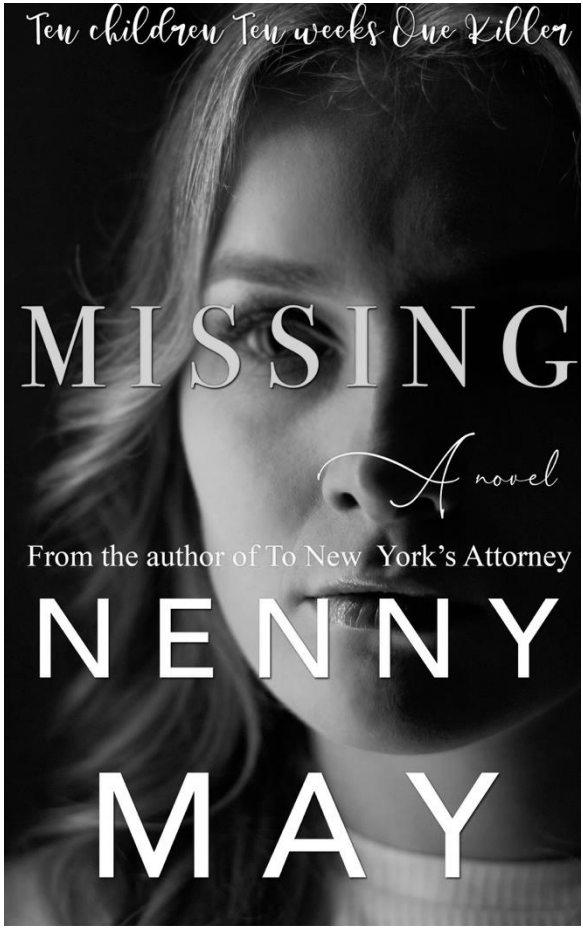
Ten children Ten weeks One Killer
MISSING
A novel
From the author of To New York's Attorney
NENNY
MAY

MISSING

BY

NENNY MAY

A NOVEL

Madison Miller is thrown in the middle of a criminal investigation when her neighbor's only son is kidnapped in a way much too similar to the way her son was kidnapped.

Ten children, ten weeks, one killer.

Abandoned bodies of ten-year-old boys have been turning up all over Charlotte, North Carolina and the inhabitants are petrified. Ten murders in ten weeks, all committed with a gunshot to the head, and still, nobody has a clue who the deranged killer is.

Laid-off news reporter and part-time babysitter Madison Miller, is tired of receiving nothing but rejection on her résumé, and so, she delves into babysitting as a fulltime

career. Little does she know just how this will affect her.

Being the only mildly trustworthy babysitter, she's entrusted with ten-year-old Ethan Daniels, only son of the now-barren couple, Lauren and Parker Daniels.

The boy goes missing, throwing Madison Miller into a thrilling panic and into the center of the investigation. Her only clue, a call begging for forgiveness.

She enlists the help of courageous former detective Adam Walker, a long-time neighbor.

Can Walker pull himself out of his rut and help Madison find answers before the deranged killer and his deadly gun claim another victim?

From the author of To New York's Attorney, Wattpad author Nenny May brings forth yet another thrilling mystery.

PROLOGUE

Alexander Hemmings needed to report the death of Oliver Weston, his tenth and final victim.

The evening air had been crisp, in the distance, the sun had begun to set, dark clouds rolled across the skies, they were a swirl of golden yellows and fading pinks. The night reeked of fast food and cigarettes, the wind whistled, dull against the blare of car horns and the sharp curses of agitated drivers. Providence road was more awake than Alexander Hemming's social life. He figured; he was never much of a social butterfly in the first place. It was a residential

area, what were so many people doing roaming the streets? Was there always traffic in this part of town? And why was he so panicked? He just needed to make a call. He needed to breathe through the subtle ache in his head, to think. Alexander Hemmings much preferred the velvet wake of the night for a walk through the streets of Charlotte; he didn't have much of a choice in this situation. He worked with time and his colleague had thrown him enough curveballs.

He released a breath pushing farther, in the distance; he recognized the supermarket he'd earlier driven passed. His tongue ran over his bottom lip, the cut on it tasted of metal. Great, not only had the little retard put up quite a fight, he'd left Alex with a busted lip. With the evening accompanied the glimmering glow of the convenience store sign, and it all had to be in Alex's mind, but the florescent store lights seemed

that much brighter. The closer he got the tighter the knots in his stomach seemed. He slowed his pace, his eyes probing the busy store. Through the doors and windows, he saw a line of customers waiting at the register. This had to be some sort of joke, was there an apocalypse he hadn't heard about? Why were there so many damn people out grocery shopping in the middle of the goddamn week? Maybe he'd made a mistake coming all the way? No, his decisions were hardly ever wrong. Everything he'd done, every call, it was a weight off his shoulders. He stopped. He couldn't draw any attention to himself, and gasping for breath while looking homeless wasn't exactly going to keep people's eyes off him.

I need an ambulance, there's a boy... he's hurt. Alex thought again about what he would say, He hoped to whatever guardian angel that had gotten him this far that there wouldn't

be too many curious ears and straying eyes. He'd always seemed to falter before an audience. He pushed the door open and slipped between the aisles. He would pick up some snacks; he would throw in a book as well. The knot tightened further, he would make the call, and then join the queue. His skin tingled; his nerves hadn't been this rattled the last time. There wasn't an audience the last time. The fierce glare of the convenience store lights didn't aid the cold sweat that ran down the side of his face. He knew this feeling; he dreaded it, not knowing what to do. No, he knew exactly what to do, he just couldn't do it with people watching, they would come after him if he didn't do it right. Okay, then he had to do it right, every line, every emotion; he would convey it like it was his first and last performance. He bit down on his tongue, heart hammering, he slid further down the aisles.

He wanted to run, to turn on his heel and hightail out those translucent doors, anyone could find Oliver Weston, and someone else could call in to report his body. The thought of someone else taking credit itched, he couldn’t let that happen. He controlled this town; he’d single handedly driven fear through the streets and given it a home smack dab in the middle of Charlotte. No measly tom-dick-and-harry was going to come in and ride the wave he’d created. Wouldn't it work in his favor if the police couldn't trace a pattern? He didn’t know, neither did he want to. He had to do this, he'd trudged Oliver's body there, to Myers Park, he had to confess, to get it off his chest. He couldn’t get his tongue tied; he couldn’t implicate himself. He would mention the body, the bruises, if asked, he knew nothing about the pulse.

"Excuse me," A man coughed, he wasn't that much older than Hemmings, in the middle of his twenties with tattered grey-blonde hair and tired, familiar eyes that had Alexander Hemmings skin crawling. He stepped to the side, deciding rather head straight for the phones at the back of the store. He didn't care for the foreplay; he didn't need the chips anyway and the book? Who was he kidding a drop-out like him wouldn't be caught dead near a book? *There's a body at Myers Park, it's Oliver Weston's.* He couldn't say that he needed to sound innocent, believable. He'd stumbled upon the body underneath a shrub by the dumpsters. What had he been doing there? It didn't matter, it was a 9-1-1 call and not a statement, he didn't need much of an alibi, just the facts.

The phones had clearly not been used in quite a while if the thick trails of cobwebs and the double coat

of dust gave off any meaning. He reached for the closest one to him; he blew on the timeworn phone. He sneezed, *Shit*! There goes not drawing any attention to himself. He sneezed again. His eyes darted left and right, there was a kid not too far to his left, behind her father who couldn’t seem to care any less, and she’d held him, Alex, in a dead stare. He turned away. He couldn’t get distracted. He dialed 9-1-1. He listened.

"9-1-1 what's your emergency?"

A tear ran down his cheek, he coughed. "There's a boy, he's lying helpless in Myers Park, he's been shot." Did he regret everything he'd put Oliver through? A part of him did, but it had to happen, he was the last of them, the tenth victim.

Why did that leave Alex feeling worse than when he'd started his killing spree?

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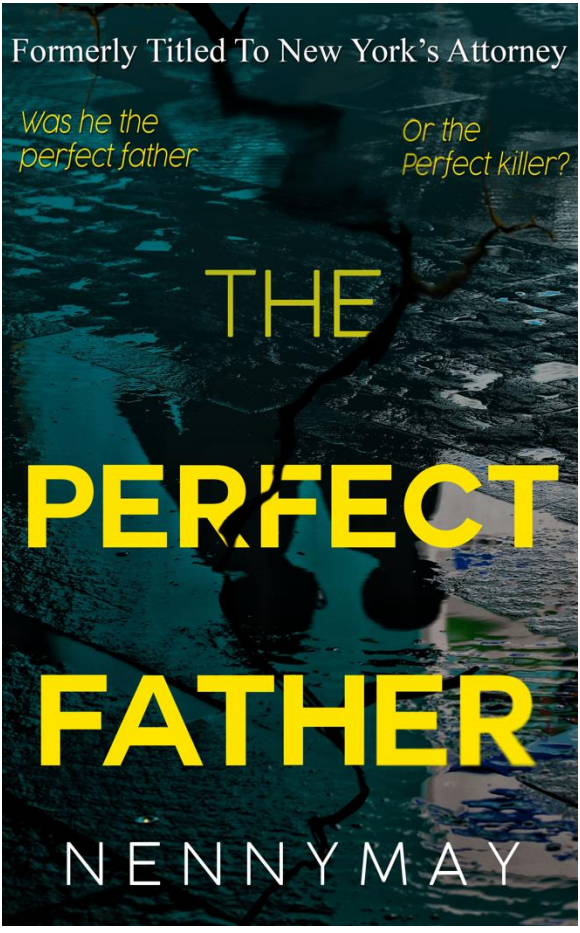
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